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PLANET

stories

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PLANET STORIES



VOL. 6, No. 10

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

SPRING, 1955

Two Novels of Distant Worlds

MIRAGE FOR PLANET X Stanley Mullen 34

The prize was sealed, its contents unknown. Yet numberless scavengers from a dozen barbaric moons; adventurers from nameless, semi-explored asteroids, arrived for the deathless auction . . . all to bid, with guns and monies, for Roper's notorious loot.

THE BRAIN SINNER Alan E. Nourse 68

An invisible network of human minds lay across the country, delicately tuned, waiting breathlessly for the first spark of contact from the unknown, unpredictable telepathic Alien.

Four Star-flung Short Stories

CAGE OF A THOUSAND WINGS Algis Budrys 4

On wings of blue-green and scarlet gold the mocking one rode the wind currents of pale and ghostly Ydlis.

THE BEAST—JEWEL OF MARS V. E. Thiessen 16

The city was strange, fantastic, beautiful. He'd never been there before, yet already he was a fabulous legend . . . a dire, hateful legend.

HAGERTY'S ENZYMES A. L. Haley 26

There's a place for every man, and a man for every place . . . but on robot-harried Mars the situation was just a wee bit different.

THE SPACE BETWEEN Robert E. Gilbert 60

Like Nathan Hale of old, Jak SP regretted having but one vitality to give for his planet . . . and starry-eyed Drusilla.

THE VIZIGRAPH 2, 91

Lair of joy and gloom.

Cover Illustration by Kelly Freas

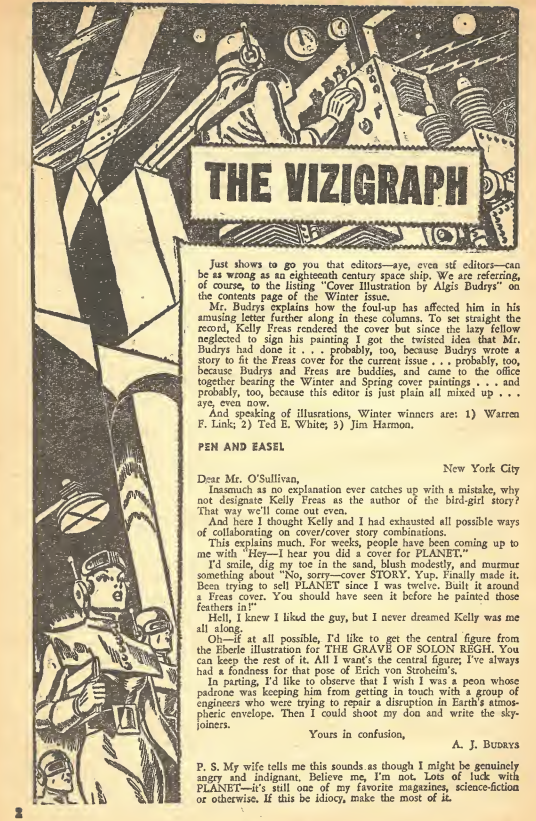
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JACK O'SULLIVAN, Editor

MALCOLM REISS, Mgr. Editor

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THE VIZIGRAPH

Just shows to go you that editors—aye, even stf editors—can be as wrong as an eighteenth century space ship. We are referring, of course, to the listing "Cover Illustration by Algis Budrys" on the contents page of the Winter issue.

Mr. Budrys explains how the foul-up has affected him in his amusing letter further along in these columns. To set straight the record, Kelly Freas rendered the cover but since the lazy fellow neglected to sign his painting I got the twisted idea that Mr. Budrys had done it . . . probably, too, because Budrys wrote a story to fit the Freas cover for the current issue . . . probably, too, because Budrys and Freas are buddies, and came to the office together bearing the Winter and Spring cover paintings . . . and probably, too, because this editor is just plain all mixed up . . . aye, even now.

And speaking of illustrations, Winter winners are: 1) Warren F. Link; 2) Ted E. White; 3) Jim Harmon.

PEN AND EASEL

New York City

Dear Mr. O'Sullivan,

Inasmuch as no explanation ever catches up with a mistake, why not designate Kelly Freas as the author of the bird-girl story? That way we'll come out even.

And here I thought Kelly and I had exhausted all possible ways of collaborating on cover/cover story combinations.

This explains much. For weeks, people have been coming up to me with "Hey—I hear you did a cover for PLANET."

I'd smile, dig my toe in the sand, blush modestly, and murmur something about "No, sorry—cover STORY. Yup. Finally made it. Been trying to sell PLANET since I was twelve. Built it around a Freas cover. You should have seen it before he painted those feathers in!"

Hell, I knew I liked the guy, but I never dreamed Kelly was me all along.

Oh—if at all possible, I'd like to get the central figure from the Eberle illustration for THE GRAVE OF SOLON REGH. You can keep the rest of it. All I want's the central figure; I've always had a fondness for that pose of Erich von Stroheim's.

In parting, I'd like to observe that I wish I was a peon whose padrone was keeping him from getting in touch with a group of engineers who were trying to repair a disruption in Earth's atmospheric envelope. Then I could shoot my don and write the sky-joiners.

Yours in confusion,

A. J. BUDRYS

P. S. My wife tells me this sounds as though I might be genuinely angry and indignant. Believe me, I'm not. Lots of luck with PLANET—it's still one of my favorite magazines, science-fiction or otherwise. If this be idiocy, make the most of it.

Ed's Note: Right, *Algis*, no explanation ever catches up with a mistake . . . and certainly not my explanation which precedes your missive. But honestly now, wasn't it fun . . . all that acclaim, I mean.

WIDE-SCREEN ANSWER

811 N. Milpas Street
Santa Barbara,
California

Dear Editor,

First of all, I thought I might sit down and relate how sickeningly unconvincing is a story containing a spaceman named Casey and a Jupiterian (awkward word, wot?) named, echhhh, Attaboy. Not only was the whole story very thin, not only was it hacked, but it was dragged down to the depths of something like . . . "Rockets blasting, Spaceman Hains dropped down through the atmosphere of the tiny planet, Bubbizinadgigh, grasping the controls with a hard, space-tanned hand." Which as you well know is merely a variation of . . . "Spurs digging, Cowboy Hains galloped down through the pass to the tiny cow-town of Split Lip, Wyoming, grasping the reins with a hard, sun-tanned hand." Now, gentlemen of the jury, I ask you, in all fairness to people who like SCIENCE FICTION, why, why must this fellow A. L. Haley (?) turn out this sort of thing? Be serious—JUPITER'S JOKE is not science-fiction. I refuse to believe anything else.

Then I thought perhaps I would sit down and help back up the opinion of Paul Mittel—Mittieb—Mutil . . . Mitt (And I thought I had difficulty convincing people to spell my name right.) that a story which supposedly does not take place in 1954 containing characters using 1954 slang is not only not convincing, it is annoying. (We all know about Alley Oop, don't we?) Or perhaps, I said to myself, I should mention that I class those who casually mention to the unknowing millions that Snavely Sackreider is really a pseudonym for Cosmo Y Ramhandler with those who idly flick cigarette ashes into their coffee cups. You see, the coffee grounds usually turn the ashes green, gagging the waitress who picks up the dishes. Ah, the marvels of chemistry. Then I read a little further and found that Mittelbuscher liked me, or at least my letters, and I said to myself, you can't slam this chap, especially when he has such interesting and accurate views on writing, (to say nothing of his marvelous, accurate appraisal of letters and letter writers—Aheh!).

Then, perhaps, I could be nasty and fly into a lavender rage and scream to high heaven that Winston Marks is an absolute moron, an incurable idiot to stand there with his facts hanging out and say, Ahem, my travelogue voice, Phobos, the nearest moon of the planet Mars, is 3700 miles from the planet, and presents a lovely large crescent to the inhabitants. Marks will soon go down the tubes unless he starts to be more accurate and say Phobos is 5800 miles from the planet and is quite small to the naked eye, since it is only 10 miles in diameter. But I liked the story, and think it drives home a very good point. Much as we hate to admit it, men, we can't get along indefinitely without women. I can safely say this without fear of letting any secrets. The women know this fact as well as we do, and sometimes I wonder . . .

All of this only serves to prove that this joker, Norman J. Clarke, is in reality some sort of international spy, hiding his real purpose behind the views he propounds in his letter. Why? You ask me why? Because no one could be so positively

insane as to really believe that sex is only a passing fad. I do hope Mr. Clarke is not trying to be empirical with his statements. I (personally) have noticed no signs of its popularity waning. But then, understand, I do not make a practice of living under a rock. Sex has, Mr. Clarke, proved to be a satisfactory method of propagating the race for quite some time now—longer than you or I are capable of grasping. Sex-urge is a cause of instability in some cases. Plato, as you may know, decried sex as retarding his work. But then, I've heard that Plato was homosexual, so I don't pay much attention to this phase of the argument. We were, Mr. Clarke, created with sex, and throughout time it has been again and again proven that a man needs a woman more than he needs anyone else. I realize you could indefinitely point to cases where this has not been true or where the principle has been corrupted, but then I could equally long deflate your arguments. We were, after all created with the sex-urge and it is only our form of society which will dictate the manner in which we satisfy it, which, I believe we could not be punished for, since we would have to be punished by He who created it in us. And lastly, why, Mr. Clarke, did you drop the subject of sex so suddenly? Was it a bit too hot to handle, or did you come up against something you were afraid you couldn't explain?

Then, saving it till last, I was going to remark on the observation of Carol McKinney that there is some nastiness on the wind about (stage whisper) Westerns. Personally, I consider it all an international plot against my rank. But never fear, the evil powers, headed by Spade Cooley, can never reap their insidious harvest of intimidation and infamy against science-fiction. Loyalty, that is our weapon! As long as there are those who will, science-fiction can never die. Chester Mountbatten can never succeed!

At last, someone realizes how sweet, lovable, and cuddly I really am. Carol, you have no idea how sweet you really are. At last someone loves me.

Tonight ladies and gentlemen, we have presented a first-hand account of the manner in which a fan writes a letter to the editor. Of course, we have not delved too deeply into the fan's mind, and have, of course, expurgated some of his thoughts. But tonight a fan letter has been written, and YOU ARE THERE.

Yours for being lovable,
UNCLE BILL TUNING

P. S. Val Walker, I suspect you of being a low, conniving bum. The University of California, largest educational institution in the world, and also the place where I attend college, will not admit Sage-runners like yourself, majoring in groundhog husbandry. Neither do I occupy myself reading that object named Tennessee Williams. As long as you're naming authors, old man, why not include Hemingway, the greatest of our time?

Since you insist on slopping up the works, allow me to inform you that I was not referring to passion. I was not referring to marriage, I was referring to love, and although the two go hand in hand they're not synonymous, you know, or do you know? I was reading about passion in Psychology and Life—Ruch, Mr. Walker, long before you Psych prof introduced you to it. And I suggest you wait until you finish your first semester of Philosophy before you bungle and call me a hedonist. You see, I don't mind you making an ass of yourself as long as you don't start shredding my statements to do so. And since you like modern, up-to-date emo-

(Continued on page 91)

Cage of a Thousand Wings

By ALGIS BUDRYS

*She rode the wind currents of pale Ydlis on
wings of blue-green and scarlet gold . . .
on wings of subtle treachery.*

THE stranger locked his eyes on Brandon's impassive face. He waved his hand at the night beyond the windows. "Somewhere out in those stars," he said clearly, "there are witches."

Shadows filled the deep sockets under Brandon's thick





eyebrows, and shadows dyed his lean jaw under the wide, high-lighted cheekbones. His lips were set in a cold curve as cruel as a sabre's edge. He sat at the rim of a circle of radiance flooding down from the room's single light, and the stranger who had come to him sat opposite.

A thousand other Brandons smiled with impersonal cruelty at a thousand other strangers trapped in the crystal angles of the mirrors panelling the room from floor to ceiling.

"I mean it," the stranger emphasized after a moment.

Brandon lit a cigarette, the expression around his eyes beyond the reach of his lighter's flare, and a drift of smoke plumed into a gray mask in front of his mouth.

"Well?" The stranger had become annoyed.

Brandon pointed suddenly at a wall, "Look there."

The man's head turned automatically, but there was nothing to see except his own face, dead-white under the harsh lamp, bewildered and nervous. He snapped his glance back to Brandon, trying to find an explanation.

"You're Barsac," Brandon said. "Of the Interstellar Scientific Wonderland of Natural Biology Combined With Barsac's Educational and Edifying Wild Animal Exposition. In other words, a cheap, tinhorn freak-show owner. You want me to capture one of these — witches — for you. Why should I?"

Barsac half rose, his face red, his mouth opening.

Brandon laughed, and a thousand Brandons laughed with him, the sound in the room as cold and slicing as broken glass.

"Now we understand each other," he said. "What kind of witches?"

"Look, Brandon—"

"What kind of witches, Barsac?"

Barsac tried to look up, to locate the pitiless stare he felt stabbing at him, but he could not. Finally he admitted defeat.

"I don't know, exactly," he said. "I don't care. I've got a sketchy report from one of my field men. He located a world inhabited by witches—he said. I don't care whether he was being melodramatic or not, but he's a good man and he knows something big

when he sees it. I've got his coordinates on the planet and copies of his reports." Barsac pulled an envelope out of his jacket and held it clumsily in his hand, looking for a place to put it down. He finally dropped it in his lap, shifted his weight awkwardly, and waited for Brandon to break the silence. At last, his face flushed once more, he muttered a curse, got to his feet, walked quickly across the lighted circle and handed Brandon the envelope. "Here." He retreated rapidly to his chair and sat waiting.

A thousand Brandons seemed to stare coldly at Barsac, ignoring the envelope.

"Well?" Barsac asked, his voice high with irritation.

"What happened to your man? Why didn't he do your job for you?"

BARSAC was on his feet, the veins at his temples throbbing like ropes. "Look—will you get me a witch or won't you? I didn't come out to this God-forsaken planetoid of yours to be sniped at! I'm a busy man. And I'm not going to let some tramp adventurer treat me like dirt just because—"

"Just because there's nobody else for you to go to?" Brandon said gently. "Yes, you are—because you know I can deliver. And you're going to pay me seventy-five hundred in rhodium to do it for you. Otherwise you can get off this God-forsaken planetoid and stop bothering me." His voice was coldly even, and he had not so much as turned his face up to Barsac's outburst.

"Five thousand," Barsac said instantly, choosing to disregard everything else.

"Ten thousand, plus expenses," Brandon replied. "I don't like bargaining—particularly since your own crew's obviously disappeared."

Barsac stared at him silently for a moment. Then he chuckled. "Done. And cheap at the price. Any other information you need?"

"Which you don't have? No. You'll hear from me."

Barsac stood up. "I'm sure I will," he said busily, his self-esteem restored by the knowledge that he'd bought the man who'd been laughing at him. "I've heard you don't break your word—and that you always get results, no matter what you're sent after."

There was a sneer in that word "sent."

Brandon ignored it. A thousand Brandons ignored it, and a thousand Brandons, rank on rank of them, reflected into infinity, laughed silently as Barsac let himself out and went back to the ship that had brought him.

But even while he laughed, Brandon followed him hungrily, drinking in the pictures that raced from Barsac's eyes to his brain. The freak show owner had left the airlock and was striding across the desolate planetoid, oblivious to the raw beauty of unweathered rock reflecting starlight from every stark cleavage plane. Far beyond, a jagged bit of its upper lobe revealing itself behind a rank of toothed and basalt-spined rocks, the sun was rising. The hull of Barsac's ship danced with polished reflections.

All of it impressed itself on Barsac's retinas and was relayed to his brain along his optic nerve, but he paid it no attention, for he was a busy man with a complicated mind. But Brandon eavesdropped desperately, intercepting each picture with the peculiarly evolved detectors in his own visual centers. He held the contact relentlessly, unwilling to let even one precious picture escape, until the ship had disappeared sunward and Barsac's borrowed eyes were out of reach.

Darkness fell over a thousand Brandons like an executioner's axe, though the useless overhead light burned until he remembered to turn it off. He drained a wineglass with a steady hand, refilled it, and refilled it again almost immediately. Neither time did he spill a drop, or pour too much or too little, for he had the hearing and touch that come to compensate the blind.

He laughed bitterly, once.

He'd speculated, often, on what, precisely, his brain had done to itself to give him this substitute for the normal vision he'd never had. But the important thing was that it worked, whether the process could be understood or not.

He laughed coldly and hungrily. "A wizard to catch a witch," he said softly. "Barsac hired better than he knew." But the thing Barsac did not know—could not have allowed for—was that like might call to like more strongly than money could.

He laughed again and raised an eyebrow at a new trick of the room's emptiness. For

just an instant, he thought he'd heard a faint echo, high, mocking, feminine.

II

A LIGHT wind sweeps down on Darralan at sunset, bringing the rusty sand of the Martian plain with it in gently drifting eddies that creep and flow along the narrow streets. Never quite settling, never resting, they search out corners and alleys, still, a hundred thousand slow years too late, yearning to give Mars back her sea.

Brandon strode up the narrow street, the mist of sand lapping at his ankles, using the eyes of passers-by like crutches. He borrowed a glimpse of pavement here, of alleyway there, setting his boots down surely and accurately. He watched himself through a hundred eyes, seeing himself from far and near, compensating for old or infirm eyes that saw him as a fuzzy striding image.

He saw himself too tall, or too short, or barely glimpsed himself at the edge of someone's vision. He saw himself suddenly monochromatic, another gray shadow in a color-blind world, and once, briefly, he saw himself by the heat of his body as someone, somewhere, pretended to be a Martian but could not disguise the fact that he saw by infra-red.

It was an automatic process by now, this game of visual leapfrog, and he devoted only a fractional part of his attention to it. He concentrated on a systematic probing of every closed door, of every mysterious alleyway.

Sometimes he saw nothing, for some corners concealed only emptiness and the drifted sand. And sometimes he saw the people of Darralan at occupations which did not interest him. But this was the old, the unpoliced, quarter of Darralan, and mostly he spied on things and deeds that would have made another man stop and push through those doorways, or else turn and walk swiftly away.

He found, finally, the place he wanted. It was a wineshop, crowded with merchant spacemen in greasy coveralls and other men in wind-worn desert robes. Dim and furtive, the shop opened its narrow doorway to the street a hundred paces ahead of him. He heard the quick beat of a drum come

drifting down the street, and his mind found him a new pair of eyes, a fresh vantage-point from which he could see the casually pretty woman amateurishly dancing on a raised stone platform.

His mouth twisted sardonically, but he grunted in satisfaction. If he had wanted kharr flowers, he would have gone to the flower sellers' mart. But he had come here, and, in a corner, bent over his drink, was Hawkes, the desert hunter, his pale eyes fastened on the woman. Brandon borrowed the eyes of a man facing the doorway and turned into it.

Hawkes, he saw, was trying to read the expression in his eyes. But all the hunter could see was the uncompromising coldness that cut through his skull and into his brain.

Hawkes had nerve and his own kind of pride. He faced that coldness and did not try to hide from it.

"All right," he said. "I don't like you, Brandon. But your money's good, and there isn't an animal anywhere that I can't catch or kill."

Brandon nodded. "That's good enough. I've got a ship and five crewmen waiting out at the field. I'll expect you there in two hours. And I don't like you, either, but I need an experienced hunter."

Hawkes shrugged. "There's no animal smarter or more dangerous than a man." He pushed his chair back. "I'm a man." He walked out of the shop.

Brandon's lips twisted in a cold smile. Hawkes might find that he wasn't as good a hunter, or as much of a man, as he thought. But Hawkes would not find out that he'd been hired for the sake of his experienced eyes. Because Brandon wanted that witch, because he was ready, if he had to, to lie and cheat, to break the word that had always been his biggest asset—or, if he had to, to kill.

HE ORDERED a bottle of the thin, bitersweet wine and sat back in the corner, sipping at the wine and the visions of the other men in the wineshop.

He laughed at his own weakness. True, he had nothing better to do for the next hour, but did he have to sit here, preying on the eyes of men who had come here to the commonplace attraction of the cheapest

kind of beauty? Did he have to, if he was as self-sufficient as he pretended to be?

He took another sip of wine and laughed aloud.

Perhaps it was the woman on the platform who chose that moment to also laugh, mocking herself, the men in the wineshop and Brandon. His mind leaped out in reflex and found a pair of eyes focused on her listless face, but there was nothing in it.

Then a drunken desert man a few tables away pushed his chair back sharply and lurched to his feet. Brandon's attention shifted to him.

There was a puzzled look in the man's muddy eyes, and his head turned uneasily, as though he did not know what he was looking for. Brandon shifted to his eyes, and saw himself. His shoulders tensed as the man began pushing his way between the tables.

Brandon eased his own chair back. The man was coming at him with a sort of puzzled purposefulness in his manner, and as he brushed by a table he reached out blindly and picked an empty bottle up by the neck.

Frowning, Brandon checked through the wineshop at random, but no one was looking either at him or the desert man. Nothing had happened, and he had no reason to believe that anything was about to. But the man was inexplicably advancing on him, still unnoticed by anyone, motivated by some quirk in his fogged mind.

Abruptly, the man swept the bottle down on the back of the chair.

The crash of sound stopped the drum as though the jagged glass had slashed its head, and the dancer stood stock-still, while the crowd stared in surprise.

Then Brandon was on his feet, one arm thrown up to guard, the other flashing toward the flat little handgun clipped to his shoulder. The desert man swayed on his spread feet, the sharded bottle clenched in his bloody fist, and lurched forward.

Someone shouted and men scrambled out of the way. Brandon saw himself raise the gun, and the drunk's misty eyes saw the muzzle swing up and point directly between them.

"Drop it!" Brandon saw himself say.

The drunk shook his head slowly. "No," he mumbled. "I hate your guts." He moved

slowly toward Brandon. "I dunno why," he said thickly as he advanced, "but I gotta kill you. Gonna carve you up an. . ."

Brandon saw the flare of the exploding gun lash out. The desert man spun half-around and dropped the bottle. He put a clumsy hand up to the hole in his shoulder. He sat down on the floor, moaning and staring vacantly at the broken glass. "Hate you," he mumbled. He looked up at Brandon, his voice full of shocked surprise. "Dunno why," he said plaintively.

"All right," Brandon growled at the crowd, "it's over. Sit down." He swept the gun in a slow arc, and the men sank back into their seats. He dropped a bill on the table and edged out of the shop, his back brushing each wall until he reached the doorway. *

As he reached the street a woman laughed in faint mockery, but there were no women walking down that narrow alley in Darralan, a score of light-years and more from the planet where the witch was waiting.

III

BRANDON kept his blind eyes on the instruments that filled the control cabin's bow, and watched Hawkes stare at the back of his neck. The hunter's eyes were sweeping from side to side, as though measuring Brandon for a bullet.

Brandon twitched a corner of his mouth. "We should be almost there," he said. "Drop her down and we'll take a look."

Hawkes shrugged. He picked up his interphone and relayed orders to the engine room, and the hum of the throaty hyperspatial generators sank to a whisper, hesitated and died. The ship dropped back into normal space and hung against the blank stars, drifting.

"See anything?" Brandon asked the hunter, who had not bothered to glance toward the screens. Hawkes gave him a puzzled look, but his eyes swung around to the screen.

Brandon sighed inaudibly, some of the lined strain loosening from the corners of his mouth. A sun floated in the cross-hairs of the forward screen, and, fourth from it, wrapped in the silky mist of atmosphere, was the planet.

"What's the name of the place again?" Hawkes asked.

"Ydlis," Brandon answered softly.

"Pretty name," Hawkes snorted. "—For a place a shipful of men didn't come back from."

Brandon frowned. "We don't know why. Maybe they liked it."

Hawkes grimaced. "I wouldn't bet on it." He studied the planet in the screen. "I've seen these pretty worlds before. I wouldn't bet anybody who ever went in there came out healthy." He turned back to Brandon. "What now?"

"We'll go into orbit around it. Barsac's men might still be up there. Anyway, I want a complete survey on the place before we go down."

Hawkes grunted. "We didn't come out here to play marbles."

"That's why we'll do it my way," Brandon told him.

They did not find the other ship. They found nothing but emptiness, and they learned nothing. The world, with its frothy seas and towering escarpments, swung beneath them and told them nothing. They hung above it for a week, raking its face with telescopes and cameras. They saw no movement, and Brandon, with Hawkes' borrowed eyes, could see no cities or smaller dwelling places.

And sometimes, in the absolute darkness of his cabin, Brandon thought he heard the planet—or something else—mocking him.

He reached a decision, finally.

"I'm going down there alone," he told Hawkes. "We're not going to trap anything up here, and we can't take the ship down without knowing what's waiting for us."

Hawkes shrugged. "We've been up here for a week, looking. I'd say there wasn't anything. But you're the boss."

"That's right," Brandon said, "I am."

Hawkes grunted under his breath. Brandon ignored it. Hawkes could think anything he liked for the time being. Later, when the hunt was on, he could find out for himself just what their quarry was if the hunt had not begun already—begun at the moment when his laugh had been echoed in the darkness of his planetoid. He bared his teeth in a worried snarl as

he clambered into his suit. He had to go alone. There was no one he could trust to take down with him. He dropped his helmet over his head and snapped its seal into the collar of his suit, wondering what he would find on Ydlis to give him eyes.

HE LANDED on the night side, in the center of a plain that stretched to the foot of a chain of cliffs. He had chosen the spot carefully, making sure beforehand that he could do it either in the dark of night or in that deeper blackness which might be waiting for him.

He raised his helmet visor, his mind casting about in circles, searching for eyes.

And what sort of eyes might he find, here on the witch-world? What would the masters of this planet look at?

He held his breath. He might have made a mistake. Barsac might have been lying, or his field man might have been babbling. But what was a witch? What would an Earthman, with an Earthman's faculties, call a witch?

He seemed to hear a voice out of his childhood.

"Get out of my mind, monster! Get out! Monster! MONSTER!"

He half-wincing as the remembered hand smashed across his face.

He wondered whether Barsac would have offered him a place in his freak show, if young Kirk Brandon had not grown into the cold, hard Brandon who protected his secret ruthlessly.

He bit his lips at the pain burrowing through his skull. He was already far beyond the short range that was all he needed on any planet, and still he had found no light in the darkness to which he had been born.

He felt fear begin to touch him. If he found nothing—? Had Barsac's men disappeared too? He was helpless. He could not even go back up into space until the ship had once more come around the planet on its orbit. Even then, he might miss and drift into the stars to die, never knowing how close he might have come to the circling ship.

There was still nothing. Ydlis was a ghost-world, and it seemed that in the darkness ghosts whispered to him and plucked

at his nerves until he was ready to slam his hand down on his firing controls and shoot plummeting up toward the stars he could not see, a blind meteor escaping from nothing. He forced his mind into one last effort.

He found eyes. At the very limits of his ability the night was suddenly starlit, and he was looking up at the cliffs.

He laughed silently at himself, and began trying to determine where the eyes were, and what they belonged to. The spacesuit was too clumsy for walking, and he took it off, packed it, and slung it from his back. With his gun in his hand, he began to walk toward the cliffs, each step an exploration.

The eyes swung away from the cliffs and dropped to the ground, then rose and looked out over the plain. Brandon searched desperately but there was nothing to see except an expanse of grass, dusky gray in the darkness, scattered with the darker jagged shapes of boulders. He might be behind one of them, or he might be out of the range of vision.

He blundered into one of the boulders, cutting his cheek open, and barely managing to keep his balance. But which boulder, and where? Feeling his way around the rock, he stumbled on, unable to tell whether he was going toward the cliffs or away from them, or whether he was simply walking in an extended circle.

The eyes turned to sweep the plain, and Brandon's pulse jumped as he saw something move. The eyes steadied on it, and he raised his arm. The moving shadow that the eyes saw raised the same arm, and Brandon's breath whistled thankfully through his teeth. At least that difficulty was over.

The shadow that was himself grew larger with appalling speed. He realized suddenly that the grass and boulders were flowing by in long, swift bounds, and just as he began to hear the faint sound of powerful feet running toward him, the darkness echoed to a high, screaming moan that rose, ullulated, and died in a hoarse cough. It was repeated almost as soon as it ended, and it came from the direction of the loping footfalls. It came from no farther than a hundred yards away.

This time he heard a laugh quite plainly

as the animal closed the distance between them. He felt the buffeting of air against his face and heard the beat of powerful wings. The beast's eyes caught a flash of green and gold, faint as a phantom in the darkness, hovering overhead. And still he could see nothing through that phantom's eyes.

Then Brandon began firing, the gun jumping in his hand, the cliffs echoing to thunder, and the beast saw red ruin, grass leaping up at its muzzle as it crashed down, and a final burst of grass, boulders, darkness, and the shadow that was Brandon, braced on one knee, firing again and again until he had killed his eyes and stood once more in absolute darkness, listening to the waning beat of phantom wings and the mockery of a woman's laugh.

Panting, Brandon tried to find the witch, but there was nothing, anymore. He forced himself to hold his breath, but there was no further sound. He turned his head slowly, trying to catch the faintest whisper on the strangely scented breeze that swept against him, but he was once again absolutely alone. This time there was not even the beast.

Suddenly he laughed. He turned his blind face up to the sky and laughed with the sound of a dam breaking. He had found what he wanted. He wondered how Barsac had imagined he could ever cage her.

IV

HE CALLED the ship down over his suit radio, waiting in his darkness until he heard it land. He walked toward it slowly, guiding himself toward the cradle of its cooling jets. Then Hawkes came out through the airlock hatch, and Brandon could see again.

He looked for the dead animal, found it as Hawkes swept the plain curiously, and grinned mirthlessly at its size. He followed Hawkes' gaze as it covered the plain and the cliffs and then turned skyward. His mouth hooked into a deadly quirk as he saw the black, curving outline of a pair of wings that beat slowly in the sky far above the cliffs.

"There she is," he said.

Hawkes grunted. "So that's our animal."

Brandon nodded. "She knows all about us. We're not going to outsmart her."

"What's our move, then?"

"There's one of her, and seven of us, and that net in the hold. With our suit jets, we're as fast in the air as she is. She'll be able to outmaneuver us, but she can't outmaneuver seven men and a net."

Hawkes kept the slowly wheeling figure in the center of his vision. "It ought to work. Unless she comes up with something unexpected—or thirty more like her suddenly turn up."

Brandon shook his head. "My contract only calls for one specimen. If that means shooting twenty-nine out of thirty, that's no concern of mine. She's tricky, and she's smart, and I suppose the rest of her kind are the same way, but she's only an animal, all the same. There's nothing special about her." He hoped Hawkes believed him.

Four men, Brandon at one end and Hawkes at the other, supported the top edge of the net. The other three tended the bottom. They drifted up in a double crescent, the metallic mesh shimmering between them.

Brandon borrowed Hawkes' eyes, and saw that they were locked on the drifting figure that slipped from updraft to updraft above the cliffs.

His throat was dry. He did not know when the girl would tire of teasing them. Probably, she would slip away just as it seemed that she could not escape, leaving only her laugh behind to float on the wind currents as lightly as she had.

Brandon had absolutely no faith in the effectiveness of the net, or in anything else they might do. But if he could get close enough to shout to her; if he could say something, anything to arouse her curiosity before she disappeared, then there was hope. Then, when she tired of the game she had been playing with him ever since the night of Barsac's call, she might come to investigate.

They drifted closer to the circling witch.

She *was* a witch. She was one of his own kind. She could do the impossible at will, could be here one instant and be gone the next, could be on a lonely planetoid or in Darralan. She could listen, watch, laugh as she half-playfully sent enemies against him.

She could ride the wind on wings of blue-green and scarlet gold. And all Earthmen could think to do with her was to call her a witch, never understanding or caring how these things were possible. She was a freak—an animal for Barsac's circus.

Brandon shuddered.

The witch tipped up her pinions and slipped sidewise down an invisible track in the dark sky.

"She's coming straight for us!" one of the men on the lower edge of the net shouted into his suit radio.

"All right," Hawkes ordered calmly, "move up on your ends, down there." The mouth of the net narrowed as the formation became a cup.

Brandon spread out his mind, and one after the other he watched her drifting down through the eyes of the other six men. He was above and below and to each side of her.

Get away! he shouted to her suddenly in his mind. *Get away, or I will catch you!* Shocked, he tried to discover what was happening to his own fierce desire.

Abruptly she was in the net, her wings beating frantically, her feet kicking at the mesh. The net closed around her.

Now! Brandon thought. *Now! Disappear. Escape!* He forgot to shout to her. He abandoned his entire plan in an instant, and waited only for her to laugh, suddenly, and melt away in golden mist.

But she did not. He stared at her through Hawkes' narrowed eyes, wondering what had happened to him. Then the momentary burst of illogic was over, and the blood raced through his body as he realized it was over. He had caught her.

They took her back to the ship and locked her in a cage. The crewmen stared at her through the bars, her sea-green tresses, and shapely golden tan body a delight to these hungry adventurers. Hawkes looked at her with a satisfied smile on his thin lips. "Well, there she is, safe and sound."

Brandon looked at her silently. His fingers dug into his palms as he tried to borrow her eyes, as he had tried before. But he could not, as he had known he could not.

"Let's get off this planet," he said finally.

IT HAD been too easy, he thought, lying still as death in the darkness of his cabin. They had come to Ydlis, captured her, and gone. No hand had been raised against them, no golden kinsman searched after her.

But Barsac's men had disappeared.

He half-listened for a mocking laugh in his ear, but there was nothing. The witch kept to her cage, huddled in a corner, unmoving, and silent.

Brandon's hackles stirred at the thought. She was like a motionless shadow in the night where no shadow should have been; unmoving and yet deadly, biding its time.

And he could not borrow her eyes. His one weapon was useless. The one potential bridge between them was down.

He twisted restlessly on his bunk, and once again he listened for her laugh, as it must come sometime when she tired of this mock-captivity.

And this time he heard her, but she was not laughing.

"Brandon." She was whispering. And she was beside his bunk. He turned his head desperately, trying to see her with the eyes that had never seen. He reached out, finally, to touch her, and found nothing.

"Where are you?"

"Here." The sound of her voice came from directly beside his head, but he could not reach her.

"I can't—"

"I know, Brandon. I am still in the cage. But I am here, as well." Something light as falling snow touched his face.

"Why didn't you escape?" he asked her. "Why are you here?" He strained hopelessly, still trying to see her.

"I did not wish to."

Her voice was quiet and calm, but there was strength in it. And a trace of puzzlement.

"You came here to catch me for that man," she said. "I did not want that. I tried to stop you. But you are not like the other Earthmen."

"Where are your people?" he asked. "What happened to Barsac's men?"

"They are on Ydlis," she whispered.

"Why couldn't we see them? Why couldn't we see any of your people but you?"

"Can you see me?" she asked gently. "But I am here."

He laughed sharply, feeling the raw edge of re-opened pain. "I couldn't see you anyway."

"I know." She brushed his face again. "The man in the wineshop should have stopped you. The plains-beast should have been able to reach you. I could not understand what happened for a time. But now I know."

He sucked in his breath. "Then. . ."

She did not give him time to tell her why he had come.

"Listen, Brandon, last night you laughed. Last night you killed the beast and laughed. And I do not think, after that, you really wanted to catch me. For Barsac or for yourself."

He lay silently in the darkness.

"I am sorry about the beast. And the man in the wineshop." The touch of falling snow brushed his face in apology. "I came here to tell you that."

She was right. He could admit it to himself now. He had watched her through Hawkes' eyes as she drifted above the cliffs, and some part of him, hidden under the longing that was born of bitter loneliness, had known that she was not made for imprisonment, whether in the cages Barsac built or the very dark cell of his solitary night.

He reached out convulsively in the dark, suddenly rebelling against his own softness. His grasping hands closed on nothing.

"Brandon!"

The single word stopped him.

Her voice was low as she went on, and faintly sad. "Brandon, you can borrow my eyes, now."

Half-afraid, he reached out with his mind.

She floated above the cliffs, her wheeling pinions catching sparks of red and gold in the sunlight. Slender-spined, fragile cities stretched across the land below her, and the sky was full of her people, gliding silently among the towers. Lovers slipped among the clouds, wing-to-wing.

She dipped a wing and drifted downward, the green plains rushing away below her, the breeze rocking her gently. And down on the plain, gray and harsh in his

spacesuit, ugly with the gun in his hand, he saw himself stumbling over the ground that held him prisoner forever. He touched his suit controls and blundered into the sky, moving like a jerky doll on creaking strings. He dropped down again and crushed his feet down on the ground, back on the soil that was his element.

The contact broke and he returned to darkness. She did not break the silence, but he could feel her beside him, waiting for him to speak.

He clenched his fists. There was no escape for him. There could never be an end to dark loneliness, and he was a fool to batter himself against the bars of his cage.

"Well, that's as plain a way of saying it as possible," he said finally. "Thanks."

"Brandon, what is a witch?"

He twitched his mouth. "I wouldn't know."

"The Khaeleians can talk to each other across the stars if they have not offended their priesthood," she said quietly. "And Earthmen can talk across the stars if their radios are given power. And the Khaeleians, knowing nothing of electronics, stare at the little boxes that talk and call the Earthmen wizards."

"So?" There was nothing new in that. He could have told Barsac the same thing. But what difference did it make?

"There are many races in the universe, Brandon. And many more in the universes beyond. There are witches everywhere."

"All right," he sighed. "All right. Do I have to unlock your cage, or can you get out by yourself?"

"I can get out. But I think you should let me out."

He nodded silently in the darkness. She was right. He had to make that last gesture. It was up to him to throw the prize away. He got up wordlessly, setting his feet on the memorized track to the door.

"I'll be waiting," the witch said, and was gone.

V

HAWKES was standing beside the cage staring at the witch. He heard Brandon coming up the companionway and turned to look at him. "You're coming on

shift a little early, aren't you?" he commented.

Brandon nodded shortly. "Go below if you want to."

Hawkes shook his head, his hungry eyes back on the witch. "I'll stick around for a while."

"Suit yourself," Brandon said. "I'm letting her go."

Hawkes spun around. "And leave her wandering around the ship?"

"No. She's going back to Ydlis. She can make it by herself."

Hawkes narrowed his eyes. "She can, eh?" He darted a glance at the witch. "Maybe she can, at that. I'm not sure I like that idea," he added thoughtfully. "No, I don't like it at all."

"It's none of your business. You're getting paid." He reached out and fumbled for the lock on the cage door as Hawkes kept his eyes on his face.

"Brandon, you're throwing away a fortune," Hawkes said.

"It's my fortune." He unlocked the door and swung it open. He saw the witch stand up to meet him as Hawkes looked past his back.

"Brandon, wait a minute!"

Brandon ignored him. "All right," he said to the witch. He laughed coldly. "Thanks for everything."

"Goodbye, Brandon." The ghost of her regretful voice faded out of the empty cage. Brandon heard the hunter curse behind him.

"You've gone crazy! To hell with Barsac's money; we could have cleaned up on her. Put her in a big cage; rig up some sort of field to keep her in. Make her fly around. We would have had them begging for the chance to buy tickets. We could have—"

"Set up our own freak show, Hawkes?" Brandon cut in. His lips peeled back. "That's a good idea. I've got some ideas about that myself." He moved toward the hunter. "You'd do very well, for example. You and Barsac. Two freaks so ugly that they hate everything that's free and beautiful." He laughed. "I could join you. We'd be a smash hit, the three of us—except that we're only ugly on the inside."

He kept moving toward the hunter, seeing his own blind, pitiless stare. He could

tell that Hawkes was fumbling in one of his pockets, but it wasn't the hunter's gun pocket. He kept his own hand away from the gun at his shoulder. His fists closed, and the muscles of his forearms tightened.

"Freak, huh?" Hawkes said. "You're not kidding, you're a freak." Something gray obscured his eyes, and then Brandon went blind as Hawkes deliberately blindfolded himself. He heard the hunter laugh. "Took me a while to figure you out," he said. Brandon heard him move, the direction of the sound lost in the echoing companionway. "I still don't know how you do it. But I know damn well you're blind as a bat without anybody else around."

Hawkes laughed again. "Come and chase me, Brandon. I've got my head in the sand. I'm not crazy enough to move again, but you don't know where I am. And if I hear you move, I'll shoot you down in your tracks. How's it feel, blindman?"

Hawkes was a ghost in the echoing dark, a slightly lighter spot of blindfolded darkness when Brandon tried to borrow his eyes. Brandon moved his head slowly from side to side, trying to make sense from the rebounding echoes.

He crouched slowly, waiting for the first creak of leather from his boots or belt to call death down upon him.

"Brandon." The hunter's voice came from a different angle or from a different echo. "Do we go back and catch her all over again? Fifty-fifty split. Or do I kill you?"

Brandon shook his head slowly. The hunter was getting too confident, too sure of his skills. He was holding all the cards. But this was Brandon's game.

"Well?"

Brandon fired at random, throwing himself sideward.

The companionway's echoes thundered to the sound of the hunter's gun as he held the trigger down and swept his fire from side to side. Steel death whined from the bulkheads and sprayed down the companionway. Brandon twisted to the shock of a slug that hammered into his side along the ribs, smashed bone, and tore itself out through the screaming muscles of his back.

His lower teeth dug at his upper lip.

"Brandon."

He held his breath, ignoring the run of

blood down his side, his gun pointed steadily up the companionway.

"Brandon?"

He could hear the hunter's hoarse breath, now, but he held his fire, waiting.

"Brandon, damn you!"

The hunter ripped the blindfold from his eyes. "Are you dea—" Brandon fired once, and the last thing Hawkes saw was death flying at his eyes.

He dragged himself blindly up the companionway until the running crewmen burst into the cabin. Then he could see again, and he got a bandage on his side, half-screaming

at the pain. He sat awkwardly in the navigator's chair and plotted a course while one of the crew stood over him.

His crewmen were drifters. They would drift farther, if he paid them.

The ship swung around and pointed her stern at Earth's sun, her nose at the stars that hung in crystalline draperies wherever the eyes of a man could see.

There were witches everywhere, and there was a ship to seek them in. And someday, perhaps, he might forget that other witch who drifted softly in the sky above the cliffs of Ydlis.



*The city was strange, fantastic, beautiful.
He'd never been there before, yet already
he was a fabulous legend—a
dire, hateful legend.*



The Beast—Jewel of Mars

By V. E. THIESSEN

HE LAY on his stomach, a lean man in faded one piece dungarees, and an odd metallic hat, peering over the side of the canal. Behind him the little winds sifted red dust into his collar, but he could not move; he could only sit there with his gaze riveted on the spires and minarets that twinkled in the distance, far down the bottom of the canal.

One part of his mind said, *This is it, this is the fabled city of Mars. This is the beauty and the fantasy and the music of the legends, and I must go down there.* Yet somewhere deeper in his mind, deep in the primal urges

that kept him from death, the warning was taut and urgent. *Get away. They have a part of your mind now. Get away from the city before you lose it all. Get away before your body becomes a husk, a soulless husk to walk the low canals with sightless eyes, like those who came before you.*

He strained to push back from the edge, trying to get that fantastic beauty out of his sight. He fought the lids of his eyes, fought to close them while he pushed himself back, but they remained open, staring at the jeweled towers, and borne on the little winds the thin wail of music reached him,



saying, *Come into the city, come down into the fabled city.*

He slid over the edge, sliding down the sloping sides of the canal. The rough sandstone tore at his dungarees, tore at his elbow where it touched but he did not feel the pain. His face was turned toward the towers, and the sound of his breathing was less than human.

His feet caught a projecting bit of stone and were slowed for an instant, so that he turned sideways and rolled on, down into the red dust bottom of the canal, to lie face down in the dust, with the chin strap of the odd metallic hat cutting cruelly into his chin.

He lay there an instant, knowing that now he had a chance. With his face down like this, and the dust smarting his eyes the image was gone for an instant. He had to get away, he knew that. He had to mount the sides of the canal and never look back.

He told himself, "I am Eric North, from Earth, the Third Planet of Sol, and this is not real."

He squirmed in the dust, feeling it bite his cheeks; he squirmed until he could get up and see nothing but the red sand stone walls of the canal. He ran at the walls and clawed his way up like an animal in his haste. He wouldn't look again.

The wind freshened and the tune of the music began to talk to him. It told of going barefoot over long streets of fur. It told of jewels, and wine, and women as fair as springtime. These and more were in the city, waiting for him to claim them.

He sobbed, and clawed forward. He stopped to rest, and slowly his head began to turn. He turned, and the spires and minarets twinkled at him, beautiful, soothing, stopping the tears that had welled down his cheeks.

When he reached the bottom of the canal he began to run toward the city.

When he came to the city there was a high wall around it, and a heavy gate carved with lotus blossoms. He beat against the gate and cried, "Oh! Let me in. Let me in to the city!" The music was richer now, as if it were everywhere, and the gate swung open without the faintest sound.

A sentinel stood before the opened gate at the end of a long blue street. He was

dressed in red silk with his sleeves edged in blue leopard skin, and he wore a belt with a jeweled short sword. He drew the sword from its scabbard, and bowed forward until the point of the sword touched the street of blue fur. He said, "I give you the welcome of my sword, and the welcome of the city. Speak your name so that it may be set in the records of the dreamers."

The music sang, and the spires twinkled, and Eric said, "I am Eric North!"

The sword point jerked, and the sentinel straightened. His face was white. He cried aloud, "It is Eric the Bronze. It is Eric of the Legend." He whirled the sword aloft, and smashed it upon Eric's metal hat, and the hatred was a blue flame in his eyes.

WHEN Eric regained consciousness the people of the city were all about him. They were very fair, and the women were more beautiful than music. Yet now they stared at him with red hate in their eyes. An older man came forward and struck at the copper hat with a stick. The clang deafened Eric and the man cried, "You are right. It is Eric the Bronze. Bring the ships and let him be scourged from the city."

The man drew back the stick and struck again, and Eric's back took fire with the blow. The crowd chanted, "Whips, bring the whips," and fear forced Eric to his feet. He fled then, running on the heedless feet of panic, outstripping those who were behind him until he passed through the great gates into the red dust floor of the canal. The gates closed behind him, and the dust beat upon him, and he paused, his heart hammering inside his chest like a great bell clapper. He turned and looked behind to be sure he was safe.

The towers twinkled at him, and the music whispered to him, "Come back, Eric North. Come back to the city."

He turned and stumbled back to the great gate and hammered on it until his fists were raw, pleading for it to open and let him back.

And deep inside him some part of his mind said, "This is a madness you cannot escape. The city is evil, an evil like you have never known," and a fear as old as time coursed through his frame.

He seized the copper hat from his head,

and beat on the lotus carvings of the great door, crying, "Let me in! Please, take me back into the city."

And as he beat the city changed. It became dull and sordid and evil, a city of disgust, with every part offensive to the eye. The spires and minarets were gargoyles of hatred, twisted and misshapen, and the sound of the city was a macabre song of hate.

He stared, and his back was chill with superstitions as old as the beginning of man. The city flickered, changing before his eyes until it was beautiful again.

He stood, amazed, and put the metal hat back on his head. With the motion the shift took place again, and beauty was ugliness. Amazed, he stared at the illusion, and the thought came to him that the metal hat had not entirely failed him after all.

He turned and began to walk away from the city, and when it began to call he took the hat off his head and found peace for a time. Then when it began again he replaced the hat, and revulsion sped his footsteps. And so, hat on, hat off, he made his way down the dusty floor of the canal, and up the rocky sides until he stood on the Martian desert, and the canal was a thin line behind him. He breathed easily then, for he was beyond the range of the illusions.

And now that his mind was his own again he began to study the problem, and to understand something of the nature of the forces against which he had been pitted.

The helmet contained an electrical circuit, designed as a shield against electrical waves tuned to affect his brain. But the hat had failed because the city, whatever it was, had adjusted to this revised pattern as he had approached it. Hence, the helmet had been no defense against illusion. However, when he had jerked the helmet off suddenly to beat on the door, his mental pattern had changed, too suddenly, and the machine caught up only after he had glimpsed another image. Then as the illusion adjusted replacing the helmet threw it off again.

He grinned wryly. He would have liked to know more about the city, whatever it was. He would have liked to know more about the people he had seen, whether they were real or part of the illusion, and if they were as ugly as the second city had been.

Yet the danger was too great. He would go back to his ship and make the arrangements to destroy the city. The ship was armed, and to deliver indirect fire over the edge of the canal would be simple enough. Garve North, his brother, waited back at the ship. If he knew of the city he would have to go there. Eric must not take a chance on that. After they had blasted whatever it was that lay in the canal floor, then it would be time enough to tell Garve, and go down to see what was left.

The ship rested easily on the flat sandstone area where he had established base camp. Its familiar lines brought a smile to Eric's face, a feeling of confidence now that tools and weapons were his again.

He opened the door and entered. The lock doors were left open so that he could enter directly into the body of the ship. He came in in a swift leap, calling, "Garve! Hey, Garve, where are you?"

The ship remained mute. He prowled through it, calling, "Garve," wondering where the young hothead had gone, and then he saw a note clipped to the control board of the ship. He tore it loose impatiently and began to read. Garve had scrawled:

"Funny thing, Eric. A while ago I thought I heard music. I walked down to the canal, and it seemed like there were lights, and a town of some sort far down the canal. I wanted to investigate, but thought I'd better come back. But the thing has been in my mind for hours now, and I'm going down to see what it is. If you want to follow, come straight down the canal."

Eric stared at the note, and the line of his jaw was white. Apparently Garve had seen the city from farther away, and its effect had not been so strong. Even so, Garve's natural curiosity had done the rest.

Garve had gone down to the city, and Garve had no shielded hat. Eric selected two high explosive grenades from the ship's arsenal. They were small but they packed a lot of power. He had a pistol packed with smaller pellets of the same explosive, and he had the hat. That should be adequate. He thrust the bronze hat back on his head and began walking back to the canal.

THE return back to the city would always live in his mind as a phantasmagora, a montage of twisted hate and unseemly

beauty. When he came again to the gate he did not attempt to enter, but circled the wall, hat on, hat off, stiff limbed like a puppet dancing to the same tune over and over again. He found a place where he could scale the wall, and thrust the helmet on his head, and clawed up the misshapen wall. It was all he could do to make himself drop into the ugly city.

He heard a familiar voice as he dropped. "Eric," the voice said. "Eric, you did come back." The voice was his brother's, and he whirled, seeking the voice. A figure stood before him, a twisted caricature of his brother. The figure cried, "The hat! You fool, get rid of that hat!" The caricature that was his brother seized the hat, and jerked so hard that the chin strap broke under Eric's chin. The hat was flung away and sailed high and far over the fence and outside the city.

The phantasm flickered, the illusion moved. Garve was now more handsome than ever, and the city was a dream of delight. Garve said, "Come," and Eric followed down a street of blue fur. He had no will to resist.

Garve said, "Keep your head down and your face hidden. If we meet someone you may not be recognized. They won't be expecting you from this side of the city."

Eric asked, "You knew I'd come after you?"

"Yes. The Legend said you'd be back."

Eric stopped and whirled to face his brother, "The Legend? Eric the Bronze? What is this wild fantasy?"

"Not so loud!" Garve's voice cautioned him. "Of course the crowd called you that because of the copper hat and your heavy tan. But the Elders believe so too. I don't know what it is, Eric, reincarnation, prophesy, superstition, I only know that when I was with the Elders I believed them. You are a part of a Legend. You are Eric the Bronze."

Eric looked down at his sun tanned hands and flexed them. He loosened the explosive pistol in its holster. At least he was going to be a well armed, well prepared Legend. And while one part of his mind marveled at the city and relaxed into a pleasure as deep as a dream, another struggled with the almost forgotten desire to rescue his

brother and escape. He asked, "Who are the Elders?"

"We are going to them, to the center of the city." Garve's voice sharpened, "Keep your head down. I think the last two men we passed are looking after us. Don't look back."

After a moment Garve said, "I think they are following us. Get ready to run. If we are separated, keep going until you reach City Center. The Elders will be expecting you." Garve glanced back, and his voice sharpened, "Now! Run!"

They ran. But as they ran figures began to converge upon them. Farther up the street others appeared, cutting off their flight.

Garve cried, "In here," and pulled Eric into a crevice between two buildings. Eric drew his gun, and savagery began to dance in his eyes. The soft fur muffled sounds of pursuit closed in upon them.

Garve put one hand on Eric's gun hand and said, "Wait here. And if you value my life, don't use that gun." Then he was gone, running deerlike down the street.

For an instant Eric thought the ruse had succeeded. He heard cries and two men passed him running in pursuit. But then the cry came back. "Let him go. Get the other one. The other one."

Eric was seen an instant later, and the people of the city began to converge upon him. He could have destroyed them all with his charges in the gun, but his brother's warning shrieked in his ears, "If you value my life don't use the gun."

There was nothing he could do. Eric stood quietly until he was taken prisoner. They moved him to the center of the wide fur street. Two men held his arms, and twisted painfully. The crowd looked at him, coldly, calculatingly. One of them said, "Get the whips. If we whip him he will not come back." The city twinkled, and the music was so faint he could hardly hear it.

There was only one weapon Eric could use. He had gathered from Garve's words that these people were superstitious.

He laughed, a great chest-shattering laugh that gusted out into the thin Martian air. He laughed and cried in a great voice, "And can you so easily dispose of a Legend? If I am Eric of the Legend, can whips defeat the prophesy?"

There was an instant when he could have twisted loose. They stood, fear-bound at his words. But there was no place to hide, and without the use of his weapons Eric could not have gone far. He had to bluff it out.

THEN one of the men cried, "Fools! It is true. We must take no chance with the whips. He would come back. But if he dies here before us now, then we may forget the prophesy."

The crowd murmured and a second voice cried, "Get the sword, get the guards, and kill him at once!"

Eric tensed to break away but now it was too late. His captors were alert. They increased the twist on his arms until he almost screamed with the pain.

The crowd parted, and the guard came through, his red silk clothing gleaming in the sun, his sword bright and deadly. He stopped before Eric, and the sword swirled up like a saber, ready for a slashing cut downward across Eric's neck.

A woman's voice, soft and yet authoritative, called, "Hold!" And a murmur of respect rippled through the crowd.

"Nolette! The Daughter of the City comes."

Eric turned his gaze to the side and saw the woman who had spoken. She was mounted upon a black horse with a jeweled bridle. She was young and her hair was long and free in the wind. She had ridden so softly across the fur street that no one had been aware of her presence.

She said, "Let me touch this man. Let me feel the pulse of his heart so that I may know if he is truly the Bronze one of the Legend. Give me your hand, stranger." She leaned down and grasped his hand. Eric shook his arms free, and reached up and clung to the offered hand, thinking, "If I pull her down perhaps I can use her as a shield." He tensed his muscles and began to pull.

She cried, "No! You fool. Come up on the horse," and pulled back with an energy as fierce as his own. Then he had swung up on the horse, and the animal leaped forward, its muffled gallop beating out a tattoo of freedom.

Eric clung tightly to the girl's waist. He could feel the young suppleness of her body,

and the fine strands of her hair kept swirling back into his face. It had a faint perfume, a clean and heady scent that made him more aware of the touch of her waist. He breathed deeply, oddly happy as they rode.

After five minutes ride they came to a building in the center of the city. The building was cubical, severe in line and architecture, and it contrasted oddly with the exquisite ornament of the rest of the city. It was as if it were a monolith from another time, a stranger crouched among enemies.

The girl halted before the structure and said, "Dismount here, Eric."

Eric swung down, his arms still tingling with pleasure where he had held her. She said, "Knock three times on the door. I will see you again inside. And thank your brother for sending me to bring you here."

Eric knocked on the door. The door was as plain as the building, made of a luminous plastic. It had all the beauty of the great gate door, but a more timeless, more functional beauty.

The door opened and an old man greeted Eric. "Come in. The Council awaits you. Follow me, please."

Eric followed down a hallway and into a large room. The room was obviously designed for a conference room. A great table stood in the room, made of the same luminous plastic as the door of the building. Six men sat at this conference table. Eric's guide placed him in a chair at the base of the T-shaped table.

There was one vacant seat beside the head of the T, and as Eric watched, the young woman who had rescued him entered and took her place there. She smiled at Eric, and the room took on a warmth that it had lacked with only the older men present. The man at her right, obviously presiding here looked at Eric and spoke, "I am Kroon, the eldest of the elders. We have brought you here to satisfy ourselves of your identity. In view of your danger in the City you are entitled to some sort of explanation." He glanced around the room and asked, "What is the judgment of the elders?"

ERIC caught a faint nod here, a gesture there. Kroon nodded as if in satisfaction. He turned to the girl, "And what is

your opinion, Daughter of the City?"

Nolette's expression held sorrow, as if she looked into the far future. She said, "He is Eric the Bronze. I have no doubt."

Eric asked, "And what is this Legend of Eric the Bronze? Why am I so despised in the city?"

Kroon answered, "According to the Ancient Legend you will destroy the city. This, and other things."

Eric gaped. No wonder the crowd had shown such hatred. But why were the elders so friendly? They were obviously the governing body, and if there was strife between them and the people it had not shown in the respect the crowd had accorded Nolette.

Kroon said, "I see you are puzzled. Let me tell you the story of the City. The City is old. It dates from long ago when the canals of Mars ran clear and green with water, and the deserts were vineyards and gardens. The drouth came, and the changes in climate, and soon it became plain that the people of Mars were doomed. They had ships, and could build more, and gradually they left to colonize other planets. Yet they could take little of their science. And fear and riots destroyed much. Also there were those who were filled with love for this homeland, and who thought that one day it might be habitable again. All the skill of the ancient Martian fathers went into the building of a giant machine, the machine that is the City, to protect a small colony of those who were chosen to remain on Mars."

"This whole city is a machine!" Eric asked.

"Yes, or the product of one. The heart of it lies underneath our feet, in caverns beneath this building. The nature of the machine is this, that it translates thought into reality."

Eric stared. The idea was staggering.

"This is essentially simple, although the technology is complex. It is necessary to have a recording device, to capture thought, a transmuting device capable of transmuting the red dust of the desert into any sort of material desired, and a construction device, to assemble this material into the pattern already recorded from thought." Kroon paused. "You still doubt, my friend. Perhaps you are thirsty after your escape. Think

strongly of a tall glass of cold water, visualize it in your mind, the sight and the fluidity and the touch of it."

Eric did so. Without warning a glass of water stood on the table before him. He touched the water to his lips. It was cool and satisfying. He drank it, convinced completely.

Eric asked, "And I am to destroy the City?"

"Yes. The time has come."

"But why?" Eric demanded. For an instant he could see the twinkling beauty as clearly as if he had stood outside the walls of this building.

Kroon said, "There are difficulties. The machine builds according to the mass will of the people, though it is sensitive to the individual in areas where it does not conflict with the imagination of the mass. We have had strangers, visitors, and even our own people, who grew drunk with the power of the machine, who dreamed more and more lust and greed into existence. These were banished from the city, and so strong is the call of the city that many of them became victims of their own evilness, and now walk mindlessly, with no thought but to seek for the beauty they have lost here."

Kroon sighed. "The people have lost the will to learn. Many do not even know of the machine. Our science is almost gone, and only a few of us, the dreamers, the elders, have kept alive the old knowledge of the machine and its history. By the collected powers of our imagination we build and control the outward appearance of the city."

"We have passed this down from father to son. A part of the ancient Legend is that the builders made provisions for the machine to be destroyed when contact with outsiders had been made once again, so that our people would again have to struggle forward to knowledge and power. The instrument of destruction was to be a man termed Eric the Bronze. It is not that you are reborn. It is just that sometime such a man would come."

Eric said, "I can understand the Bronze part. They had thought that a space man might well be sun tanned. They had thought that a science to protect against this beautiful illusion would provide a metal shield of

some sort, probably copper in nature. That such a man should come is inevitable. But why Eric. Why the name Eric?"

For the first time Nolette spoke. She said quietly, "The name Eric was an honorable name of the ancient fathers. It must have been their thought that the new beginning should wait for some of their own far flung kind to return."

Eric nodded. He asked, "What happens now?"

"Nothing. Dwell here with us and you will be safe from our people. If the prediction is not soon fulfilled and you are not the Eric of the Legend, you may stay or go as you desire."

"My brother, Garve. What about him?"

"He loves the city. He will also stay, though he will be outside this building." Kroon clasped his hands. "Nolette, will you show Eric his quarters?"

ERIC followed Nolette through a hallway to a well furnished room. Walking behind her the graceful sway of her walk reminded him of the touch of her waist as he held it earlier when they rode, and he felt the blood racing through his veins. He was tempted to seize her shoulder, turn her, and take her in his arms.

She indicated the room with a gesture. "You will be comfortable here, and you have only to wish strongly for food or drink. If your wishes do not conflict with those of the elders they will come into being."

Eric asked, "And is this true of any wish? Suppose for instance I wished for—You."

She looked at him steadily, "That would depend on the nature of your wish. If you wished to take me as your wife the elders would approve."

Eric looked at her. He had hardly known her two hours. Yet the madness of the moment made him rash, and he asked, "And what of your wishes, Nolette?"

She said, "I am the Daughter of the City, and a virgin. If the Legend is to be fulfilled I would be wed before I die."

He took a step forward and reached out to take her in his arms, but she slipped away, saying quietly, "Not now. I will go away and let you think. When you have decided call me in your mind, and the

machine will let me know." She smiled briefly, and left him alone in the room.

Eric was hardly aware of his actions as he seated himself in the comfortable chair. He fumbled about for his pipe. He must not be a fool. Perhaps if he thought quietly, and smoked, he could decide if this was a dream, if he had gone quietly mad in his space ship, and had been the victim of hallucinations. The chair was real to his touch, his pipe was gone, and he remembered leaving it in the navigators section of the ship upon his earlier return. The memory seemed real enough. He wished for his pipe again, and realized that now he held it in his hand.

This was no mirage. He tamped tobacco created by the machine from Red Martian dust into the bowl of the pipe, and the smoke was as fragrant as ever. He could see how such luxury would stagnate a race. As the smoke curled around him he knew that two hours or two years were not important, and he knew what he wanted. He wished for Nolette.

She came into the room, watching him quietly, suddenly shy. He said, "It has come to me that I love you. Will you do me the honor to become my wife?"

She said, "Yes, Eric. Oh! Yes!" and came running to him. Her kiss had all the passion of his own.

An hour later she slipped from his arms, saying, "I must go and talk with the elder dreamers. We must be married today, at once. We have so little time. We must be husband and wife tonight." She slipped softly from the room.

Eric watched her, marveling at his luck. He suddenly remembered that he had not seen his brother since he had arrived at the house of the elder dreamers. He wondered where Garve was, and wanted to talk to him. Perhaps if he thought strongly enough the machine would get the message thought to Garve. He concentrated.

Ten minutes later Garve walked into the room. He said, "I thought I heard you calling. How'd you make out with the dreamers?"

"Well enough. Don't think me mad, Garve, but Nolette and I are to be married, tonight."

Garve's face grew red, then as white as

river sand. He said bitterly, "I should have let them kill you in the street, but how could I? After all we are brothers."

"You love her too."

"No! But I love this city. It is paradise, and now you will destroy it."

Eric said, "The Legend again! Everyone believes it. Yet it is but a prediction. In time such a man as the Legend had to come, and some day one more greedy than myself may destroy the city. Perhaps I will refuse to carry out the destruction."

Garve laughed, a bitter cynical laugh. He cried, "You fool! How can you help yourself? Everyone believes you are the Bronze one and the machine will make that come true. How can you defeat the machine?"

Eric was staggered by a logic he had not even considered.

"Piece by piece," Garve said, "the prediction is coming to pass. Now you are to wed Nolette, and that too is a part of the Legend."

"That was predicted?"

"Yes. And that is not the end." Garve's voice was as sharp as the bite of a whip. "Do you know what else you will do?"

"No!" A thin horror seeped slowly into Eric's mind.

"You will destroy the Daughter of the City."

Eric's eyes were wide. He shuddered and cried, "NO! NO!"

Garve's face took on the glint of madness. He said, "But I will stop you. I'll stop you if I have to kill you." He turned and strode bitterly from the room.

HORROR was still fresh in Eric's mind when Nolette returned. "All is ready," she said. "Come now, my husband-to-be."

Eric followed her into the chamber of the elder dreamers. Kroon stood at the doorway and greeted him as he entered. He said, "One cannot fight the truth, so we have consented to this marriage. Will you join hands?"

The ceremony was simple, but beautiful, much like an Earth wedding, with the city making music that was beautiful beyond belief. But all the time Eric listened his mind was working, and by the time he had kissed his bride at the end of the ceremony he knew what he had to do. He walked

back to their room with his arm around her waist, and his resolve weakened with each step.

Yet when he reached the room he had the will to say, "I must leave you for a time. When I return our life together will begin." He kissed her again, and said, "It will not be long."

He broke away, and left her. When he reached the hallway he felt once in his pocket to be sure the explosive grenades were still there. So far the machine had controlled his destiny. So far the very belief of the dreamers in his destiny had brought the predictions to pass. Very well now, he would destroy the machine, but not at the request of the dreamers. He would do it now, before there was time to consummate the horrible part of the prediction. Then he would come back to Nolette and his honeymoon.

He ran along the hallways, always going down when he found a stairway, always seeking the central area below that had been indicated by Kroon in their first talk. And when at length he came out into a large room, with a maze of delicate electronic apparatus below, he knew he had arrived, and he pulled the grenade from his pocket.

Yet before he pulled the safety release he could not but marvel a moment at the intricate science below him. Much was familiar, and much was unintelligible.

As he stood he was seized from behind, and he twisted to find he was caught in the hate strengthened grip of his brother. Pain lanced through his arm, and Garve gritted, "Drop it." Eric dropped the grenade, and it fell between them. Eric was suddenly glad that the safety had not been pulled, and then he was fighting savagely with his brother.

He was older, and wiser in the dirty tricks of fighters from the planets. After a time he was able to set himself, and bend forward. Where Garve had been behind, now he was flung up, over Eric's back in a sprawling arc. He fell, teetered for an instant, and then crashed into the delicate heart of the machine below. Glass tinkled, and a flare lit the room. Eric closed his eyes, afraid to look. Garve must have been electrocuted.

ERIC opened his eyes to find the room subtly changed. It was roughly the same, but the walls were a rough sandstone, and the glamour was gone. He heard sounds, and saw Garve struggling up from the wreckage below. Both of them knew it was ended. The machine was beyond repair.

Garve paused. He said, "It's over now. I suppose in a year or two I shall forget this. I am going away. Until I can forgive you I shall stay away. God grant you peace, for you have lost more than I." Garve's steps echoed hollowly on the stone corridor and he disappeared in the distance.

Eric stood quietly. There was no happiness in him, only a nameless fear brought on by his brother's words, a fear that he had forgotten something.

Then suddenly he knew what it was. He remembered the ugly city. When he came out of the corridor, out of this building, the city would be a foul sty again. And the people, he had not seen the people, but they would no doubt be horrible. Nolette, his wife—he could not let himself think of how she would look. It seemed Garve was right and the final prediction had come true. All was finished, even the Daughter of the City had been destroyed.

He began to move up out of the subterranean room and back to the city. He reached the outer door, and did not even pause to look for Nolette, but set his teeth, and stepped out into the city.

And there he was surprised. Here was no ugly city, only a very normal, ordinary one, with ordinary persons going about the streets, blinking at the changes. The lines of the city were still there, but the jeweled panes were ordinary glass.

Eric tried to understand. Then suddenly he recalled his hatred of the city when he had been cast out, his subconscious thoughts of it as evil. He had taken off the helmet, and for an instant he had been out of contact with the elders, disoriented. In that

instant the city had shown him his own concept of ugliness. That ugly city was as unreal as the fantastically beautiful one created by the elders.

Eric turned, and went back into the building, looking for Nolette.

He found her, standing with Kroon in the great room, before a table which was only laminated wood. She was a slender girl, gray eyed, pleasant to look at, but without the beauty and the music and the witchery of her counterpart.

She said quietly, "It is finished, Eric, and we are not the two who married. It is finished, and the dream is ended."

Eric said only, "Yes," watching her.

She said, "I release you from the marriage. It will be a memory for us both, a wonderful dream that ended before it was consummated, a dream cut short too soon."

Eric asked, "What will you do?" Her voice was hardly changed, and watching her he felt an odd pleasure. There was no wild racing of his blood, yet his interest was awakening.

She said, "Go away, I suppose, as far as I can from this place."

He liked the way she was taking this. No dramatics, no tears.

He said, "I could take you back to Earth as a passenger. You might like Earth." He felt oddly eager as she considered.

And then suddenly, he could not wait, and the words came tumbling out. "Nolette," he said, "you must come with me. I do not know how it will be with us yet. But somehow I feel that if we stay together things will be good."

He waited for her decision, half afraid, half eager, and then saw a slow smile break the seriousness of her eyes.

She said gently, "If that is what you wish." The smile widened. "A girl must follow her husband. Even I know that."

Eric reached out and took her hand. "The ship is waiting," he said. "Let's go home."

HAGERTY'S ENZYMES

By A. L. HALEY

There's a place for every man and a man for every place, but on robot-harried Mars the situation was just a little different.

HARPER BREEN sank down gingerly into the new Relaxo-Lounge. He placed twitching bands on the armrests and laid his head back stiffly. He closed his fluttering eyelids and clamped his mouth to keep the corner from jumping.

"Just lie back, Harp," droned his sister soothingly. "Just give in and let go of everything."

Harper tried to let go of everything. He gave in to the chair. And gently the chair went to work. It rocked rhythmically, it vibrated tenderly. With velvety cushions it massaged his back and arms and legs.

For all of five minutes Harper stood it. Then with a frenzied lunge he escaped the embrace of the Relaxo-Lounge and fled to a gloriously stationary sofa.

"Harp!" His sister, Bella, was ready to weep with exasperation. "Dr. Franz said it would be just the thing for you! Why wouldn't you give it a trial?"

Harper glared at the preposterous chair. "Franz!" he snarled. "That prize fathead! I've paid him a fortune in fees. I haven't slept for weeks. I can't eat anything but soup. My nerves are jangling like a four-alarm fire. And what does he prescribe? A blasted jiggling baby carriage! Why, I ought to send him the bill for it!" Completely outraged, he lay back on the couch and closed his eyes.

"Now, Harp, you know you've never obeyed his orders. He told you last year that you'd have to ease up. Why do you have to try to run the whole world? It's the strain of all your business worries that's causing your trouble. He told you to take a long vacation or you'd crack up. Don't blame him for your own stubbornness."

Harper snorted. His large nose developed

the sound magnificently. "Vacation!" he snorted. "Batting a silly ball around or dragging a hook after a stupid fish! Fine activities for an intelligent middle-aged man! And let me correct you. It isn't business worries that are driving me to a crack-up. It's the strain of trying to get some sensible, reasonable cooperation from the nincompoops I have to hire! It's the idiocy of the human race that's got me whipped! It's the—"

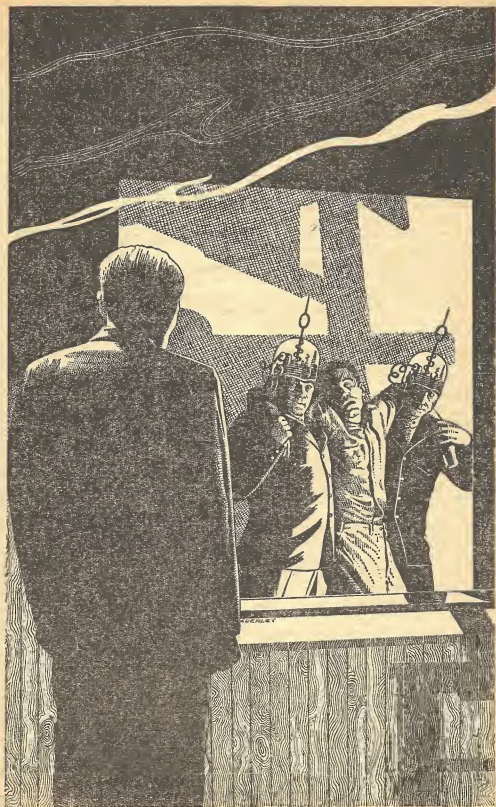
"Hey, Harp, old man!" His brother-in-law, turning the pages of the new colorama magazine, INTERPLANETARY, had paused at a double-spread. "Didn't you have a finger in those Martian equatorial wells they sunk twenty years ago?"

Harper's hands twitched violently. "Don't mention that fiasco!" he rasped. "That deal nearly cost me my shirt! Water, hell! Those wells spewed up the craziest conglomeration of liquids ever tapped!"

SCRIBNEY, whose large, phlegmatic person and calm professorial brain were the complete antithesis of Harper's picked-crow physique and scheming financier's wits, looked severely over his glasses. Harp's nervous tribulations were beginning to bore him, as well as interfere with the harmony of his home.

"You're away behind the times, Harp," he declared. "Don't you know that those have proved to be the most astoundingly curative springs ever discovered anywhere? Don't you know that a syndicate has built the largest extra-terrestrial hotel of the solar system there and that people are flocking to it to get cured of whatever ails 'em? Old man, you missed a bet!"

Leaping from the sofa, Harper rudely



snatched the magazine from Scribney's hands. He glared at the spread which depicted a star-shaped structure of bottle-green glass resting jewel-like on the rufous rock of Mars. The main portion of the building consisted of a circular skyscraper with a glass-domed roof. Between its star-shaped annexes, other domes covered landscaped gardens and noxious pools which in the drawing looked lovely and enticing.

"Why, I remember now!" exclaimed Bella. "That's where the Durants went two years ago! He was about dead and she looked like a hag. They came back in wonderful shape. Don't you remember, Scrib?"

Dutifully Scribney remembered and commented on the change the Martian springs had effected in the Durants. "It's the very thing for you, Harp," he advised. "You'd get a good rest on the way out. This gas they use in the rockets nowadays is as good as a rest-cure; it sort of floats you along the time-track in a pleasant daze, they tell me. And you can finish the cure at the hotel while looking it over. And not only that." Confidentially he leaned toward his insignificant looking brother-in-law. "The chemists over at Dade McCann have just isolated an enzyme from one species of Martian fungus that breaks down crude oil into its components without the need for chemical processing. There's a fortune waiting for the man who corners that fungus market and learns to process the stuff!"

Scribney had gauged his victim's mental processes accurately. The magazine sagged in Harp's hands, and his sharp eyes became shrewd and calculating. He even forgot to twitch. "Maybe you're right, Scrib," he acknowledged. "Combine a rest-cure with business, eh?"

Raising the magazine, he began reading the advertisement. And that was when he saw the line about the robots. "—the only hotel staffed entirely with robot servants—"

"Robots!" he shrieked. "You mean they've developed the things to that point? Why hasn't somebody told me? I'll have Jackson's hide! I'll disfranchise him! I'll—"

"Harp!" exploded Bella. "Stop it! Maybe Jackson doesn't know a thing about it, whatever it is! If it's something at the Emerald Star Hotel, why don't you just go and find out for yourself instead of throw-

ing a tantrum? That's the only sensible way!"

"You're right, Bella," agreed Harper incisively. "I'll go and find out for myself. Immediately!" Scooping up his hat, he left at his usual lope.

"Well!" remarked his sister. "All I can say is that they'd better turn that happy-gas on extra strong for Harp's trip out!"

THE trip out did Harper a world of good. Under the influence of the soporific gas that permeated the rocket, he really relaxed for the first time in years, sinking with the other passengers into a hazy lethargy with little sense of passing time and almost no memory of the interval.

It seemed hardly more than a handful of hours until they were strapping themselves into deceleration hammocks for the landing. And then Harper was waking with lassitude still heavy in his veins. He struggled out of the hammock, made his way to the airlock, and found himself whisked by pneumatic tube directly into the lobby of the Emerald Star Hotel.

Appreciatively he gazed around at the half-acre of moss-gray carpeting, green-tinted by the light sifting through the walls of Martian copper-glass, and at the vistas of beautiful domed gardens framed by a dozen arches. But most of all, the robots won his delighted approval.

He could see at once that they had been developed to an amazingly high state of perfection. How, he wondered again, had this been done without his knowledge? Was Scrib right? Was he slipping? Gnawing at the doubt, he watched the robots moving efficiently about, pushing patients in wheelchairs, carrying trays, guiding newcomers, performing janitorial duties tirelessly, promptly, and best of all, silently.

Harper was enthralled. He'd staff his offices with them. Hang the expense! There'd be no more of that obnoxious personal friction and proneness to error that was always deviling the most carefully trained office staffs! He'd investigate and find out the exact potentialities of these robots while here, and then go home and introduce them into the field of business. He'd show them whether he was slipping! Briskly he went over to the desk.

He was immediately confronted with a sample of that human obstinacy that was slowly driving him mad. Machines, he sighed to himself. Wonderful silent machines! For a woman was arguing stridently with the desk clerk who, poor man, was a high strung fellow human instead of a robot. Harper watched him shrinking and turning pale lavender in the stress of the argument.

"A nurse!" shouted the woman. "I want a nurse! A real woman! For what you charge, you should be able to give me a television star if I want one! I won't have another of those damnable robots in my room, do you hear?"

No one within the confines of the huge lobby could have helped hearing. The clerk flinched visibly. "Now, Mrs. Jacobsen," he soothed. "You know the hotel is staffed entirely with robots. They're much more expensive, really, than human employees, but so much more efficient, you know. Admit it, they give excellent service, don't they, now?" Toothily he smiled at the enraged woman.

"That's just it!" Mrs. Jacobsen glared. "The service is *too* good. I might just as well have a set of push buttons in the room. I want someone to *bear* what I say! I want to be able to change my mind once in awhile!"

Harper snorted. "Wants someone she can devil," he diagnosed. "Someone she can get a kick out of ordering around." With vast contempt he stepped to the desk beside her and peremptorily rapped for the clerk.

"One moment, sir," begged that harassed individual. "Just one moment, please." He turned back to the woman.

But she had turned her glare on Harper. "You could at least be civil enough to wait your turn!"

Harper smirked. "My good woman, I'm not a robot. Robots, of course, are always civil. But you should know by now that civility isn't a normal human trait." Leaving her temporarily quashed, he beckoned authoritatively to the clerk.

"I've just arrived and want to get settled. I'm here merely for a rest-cure, no treatments. You can assign my quarters before continuing your—ah—discussion with the lady."

The clerk sputtered. Mrs. Jacobsen sputtered. But not for nothing was Harper one of the leading business executives of the earth. Harper's implacable stare won his point. Wiping beads of moisture from his forehead, the clerk fumbled for a card, typed it out, and was about to deposit it in the punch box when a fist hit the desk a resounding blow and another voice, male, roared out at Harper's elbow.

"This is a helluva joint!" roared the voice. "Man could rot away to the knees while he's waitin' for accommodations. Service!" Again his fist banged the counter.

The clerk jumped. He dropped Harper's card and had to stoop for it. Absently holding it, he straightened up to face Mrs. Jacobsen and the irate newcomer. Hastily he pushed a tagged key at Harper.

"Here you are, Mr. Breen. I'm sure you'll find it comfortable." With a pallid smile he pressed a button and consigned Harper to the care of a silent and efficient robot.

THE room was more than comfortable. It was beautiful. Its bank of clear windows set in the green glass wall framed startling rubicund views of the Martian hinterland where, Harper affectionately thought, fungi were busy producing enzymes that were going to be worth millions for him and his associates. There remained only the small detail of discovering how to extract them economically and to process them on this more than arid and almost airless planet. Details for his bright young laboratory men; mere details. . . .

Leaving his luggage to be unpacked by the robot attendant, he went up to the domed roof restaurant. Lunching boldly on broiled halibut with consomme, salad and a bland custard, he stared out at the dark blue sky of Mars, with Deimos hanging in the east in three-quarter phase while Phobos raced up from the west like a meteor behind schedule. Leaning back in his cushioned chair, he even more boldly lit a slim cigar—his first in months—and inhaled happily. For once old Scribney had certainly been right, he reflected. Yes sir, Scrib had rung the bell, and he wasn't the man to forget it. With a wonderful sense of well-

being he returned to his room and prepared to relax.

Harper opened his eyes. Two robots were bending over him. He saw that they were dressed in white, like hospital attendants. But he had no further opportunity to examine them. With brisk, well-co-ordinated movements they wheeled a stretcher alongside his couch, stuck a hypo into his arm, bundled him onto the stretcher and started wheeling him out.

Harper's tongue finally functioned. "What's all this?" he demanded. "There's nothing wrong with me. Let me go!"

He struggled to rise, but a metal hand pushed him firmly on the chest. Inexorably it pushed him flat.

"You've got the wrong room!" yelled Harp. "Let me go!" But the hypo began to take effect. His yells became weaker and drowsier. Hazily, as he drifted off, he thought of Mrs. Jacobsen. Maybe she had something, at that.

THERE was a tentative knock on the door. "Come in," called Harper bleakly. As soon as the door opened he regretted his invitation, for the opening framed the large untidy man who had noisily pounded on the desk demanding service while he, Harp, was being registered.

"Say, pardner," he said hoarsely, "you haven't seen any of them robots around here, have you?"

Harper scowled. "Oh, haven't I?" he grated. "Robots! Do you know what they did to me." Indignation lit fires in his pale eyes. "Came in here while I was lying down peacefully digesting the first meal I've enjoyed in months, dragged me off to the surgery, and pumped it all out! The only meal I've enjoyed in months!" Blackly he sank his chin onto his fist and contemplated the outrage.

"Why didn't you stop 'em?" reasonably asked the visitor.

"Stop a robot?" Harper glared pityingly. "How? You can't reason with the blasted things. And as for using force—it's man against metal. You try it!" He ground his teeth together in futile rage. "And to think I had the insane notion that robots were the last word! Why, I was ready to staff my offices with the things!"

The big man placed his large hands on his own capacious stomach and groaned. "I'm sure sorry it was you and not me, pardner. I could use some of that treatment right now. Musta been that steak and onions I ate after all that tundra dope I've been livin' on."

"Tundra?" A faint spark of alertness lightened Harper's dull rage. "You mean you work out here on the tundra?"

"That's right. How'd you think I got in such a helluva shape? I'm superintendent of one of the fungus plants. I'm Jake Ellis of Hagerty's Enzymes. There's good money in it, but man, what a job! No air worth mentionin'. Temperature always freezin' or below. Pressure suits. Huts. Factory. Processed food. Nothin' else. Just nothin'. That's where they could use some robots. It sure ain't no job for a real live man. And in fact, there ain't many men left there. If old man Hagerty only knew it, he's about out of business."

Harper sat up as if he'd been needed. He opened his mouth to speak. But just then the door opened briskly and two robots entered. With a horrified stare, Harper clutched his maltreated stomach. He saw a third robot enter, wheeling a chair.

"A wheel chair!" squeaked the victim. "I tell you, there's nothing wrong with me! Take it away! I'm only here for a rest-cure! Believe me! Take it away!"

The robots ignored him. For the first time in his spectacular and ruthless career Harper was up against creatures that he could neither bribe, persuade nor browbeat, inveigle nor ignore. It shattered his ebbing self-confidence. He began waving his hands helplessly.

The robots not only ignored Harper. They paid no attention at all to Jake Ellis, who was plucking at their metallic arms pleading, "Take me, boys. I need the treatment bad, whatever it is. I need all the treatment I can get. Take me! I'm just a wreck, fellers—"

Solidly they picked Harper up, plunked him into the chair, strapped him down and marched out with him.

Dejectedly Ellis returned to his own room. Again he lifted the receiver of the room phone; but as usual a robot voice answered sweetly, mechanically, and mean-

inglessly. He hung up and went miserably to bed.

THERE was something nagging at Harper's mind. Something he should do. Something that concerned robots. But he was too exhausted to think it out.

For five days now his pet robots had put him through an ordeal that made him flinch every time he thought about it. Which wasn't often, since he was almost past thinking. They plunked him into stinking mud-baths and held him there until he was well-done to the bone, he was sure. They soaked him in foul, steaming, irradiated waters until he gagged. They brought him wierd concoctions to eat and drink and then stood over him until he consumed them. They purged and massaged and exercised him.

Whenever they let him alone, he simply collapsed into bed and slept. There was nothing else to do anyway. They'd taken his clothes; and the phone, after an announcement that he would have no more service for two weeks, gave him nothing but a busy signal.

"Persecution, that's what it is!" he moaned desperately. And he turned his back to the mirror, which showed him that he was beginning to look flesh-colored instead of the parchment yellow to which he had become accustomed. He closed his mind to the fact that he was sleeping for hours on end like the proverbial baby, and that he was getting such an appetite that he could almost relish even that detestable mush they sent him for breakfast. He was determined to be furious. As soon as he could wake up enough to be.

He hadn't been awake long this time before Jake Ellis was there again, still moaning about his lack of treatments. "Nothin' yet," he gloomily informed Harp. "They haven't been near me. I just can't understand it. After I signed up for the works and paid 'em in advance! And I can't find any way out of this section. The other two rooms are empty and the elevator hasn't got any button. The robots just have to come and get a man or he's stuck."

"Stuck!" snarled Harp. "I'm never stuck!" And I'm damned if I'll wait any longer to break out of this—this jail! Listen,

Jake. I've been thinking. Or trying to, with what's left of me. You came in just when that assinine clerk was registering me. I'll bet that clerk got rattled and gave me the wrong key. I'll bet you're supposed to have this room and I'm getting your treatments. Why don't we switch rooms and see what happens?"

"Say, maybe you're right!" Jake's eyes gleamed at last with hope. "I'll get my clothes."

Harp's eyebrows rose. "You mean they left you your clothes?"

"Why, sure. You mean they took yours?"

Harp nodded. An idea began to formulate. "Leave your things, will you? I'm desperate! I'm going to see the manager of this madhouse if I have to go down dressed in a sheet. Your clothes would be better than that."

Jake, looking over Harper's skimpy frame, grunted doubtfully. "Maybe you could tie 'em on so they wouldn't slip. And roll up the cuffs. It's okay with me, but just don't lose something when you're down there in that fancy lobby."

Harp looked at his watch. "Time to go. Relax, old man. The robots will be along any minute now. If you're the only man in the room, I'm sure they'll take you. They aren't equipped to figure it out. And don't worry about me. I'll anchor your duds all right."

Harper had guessed right. Gleefully from the doorway of his new room he watched the robots wheel away his equally delighted neighbor for his first treatment. Then he closed the door and began to don Jake's clothing.

The result was unique. He looked like a small boy in his father's clothes, except for the remarkably aged and gnome-like head sticking up on a skinny neck from a collar three sizes too big. And he was shoeless. He was completely unable to navigate in Jake's number twelves. But Harper was a determined man. He didn't even flinch from his image in the mirror. Firmly he stepped over to Jake's telephone. "This is room 618," he said authoritatively. "Send up the elevator for me. I want to go down to the lobby."

He'd guessed right again. "It will be right up, sir," responded the robot operator.

Hopefully he stepped out into the hall and shuffled to the elevator.

ONLY the robots were immune to Harper Breen's progress across the huge suave lobby.

He was a blot on its rich beauty, a grotesque enigma that rooted the other visitors into paralyzed staring groups. Stepping out of the elevator, he had laid a course for the desk which loomed like an island in a moss-gray lake, and now he strode manfully toward it, ignoring the oversize trousers slapping around his stocking feet. Only the robots shared his self control.

The clerk was the first to recover from the collective stupor. Frantically he pushed the button that would summon the robot guard. With a gasp of relief he saw the two massive manlike machines moving inexorably forward. He pointed to Harper. "Get that patient!" he ordered. "Take him to the—to the mudbaths!"

"No you don't!" yelled Harper. "I want to see the manager!" Nimbly he circled the guard and leaped behind the desk. He began to throw things at the robots. Things like inkwells and typewriters and card indexes. Especially, card indexes.

"Stop it!" begged the clerk. "You'll wreck the system! We'll never get it straight again! Stop it!"

"Call them off!" snarled Harper. "Call them off or I'll ruin your switchboard!" He put a shoulder against it and prepared to leave.

With one last appalled glare at the madman, the clerk picked up an electric finger and pointed it at the approaching robots. They became oddly inanimate.

"That's better!" Harper straightened up and meticulously smoothed the collar of his flapping coat. "Now—the manager, please."

"This—this way, sir." With shrinking steps the clerk led Harper across the width of the lobby among the fascinated guests. He was beyond speech. Opening the inconspicuous door, he waved Harper inside and returned doggedly to his desk, where he began to pick up things and at the same time phrase his resignation in his mind.

Brushing aside the startled secretary in the outer cubicle, Harper flapped and shuffled straight into the inner sanctum. The

manager, who was busy chewing a cigar to shreds behind his fortress of gun metal desk, jerked hastily upright and glared at the intruder. "My good man—" he began.

"Don't 'my-good-man' me!" snapped Harper. He glared back at the manager. Reaching as far across the expanse of desktop as he could stretch, he shook his puny fist. "Do you know who I am? I'm Harper S. Breen, of Breen and Helgart, Incorporated! And do you know why I haven't even a card to prove it? Do you know why I have to make my way downstairs in garb that makes a laughing stock of me? Do you know why? Because that assinine clerk of yours put me in the wrong room and those damnable robots of yours then proceeded to make a prisoner of me! Me, Harper S. Breen! Why, I'll sue you until you'll be lucky if you have a sheet of writing-paper left in this idiot's retreat!"

Hayes, the manager, blanched. Then he began to mottle in an apoplectic pattern. And suddenly with a gusty sigh, he collapsed into his chair. With a shaking hand he mopped his forehead. "My robots!" he muttered. "As if I invented the damned things!"

Despondently he looked at Harper. "Go ahead and sue, Mr. Breen. If you don't, somebody else will. And if nobody sues, we'll go broke anyway, at the rate our guest list is declining. I'm ready to hand in my resignation."

Again he sighed. "The trouble," he explained, "is that those fool robots are completely logical, and people aren't. There's no way to mix the two. It's dynamite. Maybe people can gradually learn to live with robots, but they haven't yet. Only we had to find it out the hard way. We—" he grimaced disgustedly—"had to pioneer in the use of robots. And it cost us so much that we can't afford to reconvert to human help. So—Operation Robot is about to bankrupt the syndicate."

Listening, an amazing calm settled on Harper. Thoughtfully now he hooked a chair to the desk with his stockinged foot, sat down and reached for the cigar that Hayes automatically offered him. "Oh, I don't know," he said mildly.

Hayes leaned forward like a drowning man sighting a liferaft. "What do you

mean, you don't know? You're threatening to take our shirts, aren't you?"

Meticulously Harper clipped and lit his cigar. "It seems to me that these robots might be useful in quite another capacity. I might even make a deal with your syndicate to take them off your hands—at a reasonable price, of course—and forget the outrages I've suffered at your establishment."

Hayes leaned toward him incredulous. "You mean you want these robots after what you've seen and experienced?"

Placidly Harper puffed a smoke ring. "Of course, you'd have to take into consideration that it would be an experiment for me, too. And there's the suit I'm clearly justified in instituting. However, I'm willing to discuss the matter with your superiors."

With hope burgeoning for the first time in weeks, Hayes lifted his head. "My dear Mr. Breen, to get rid of these pestiferous robots, I'll back you to the hilt! I'll notify the owners at once. At once, Mr. Breen! And while we wait for them, allow me to put you up as a guest of the hotel." Coming around to Harper, he effusively shook Harp's scrawny hand, and then personally escorted him not merely to the door but across the lobby to the elevator.

Harper gazed out at the stunned audience. This was more like the treatment he was accustomed to! Haughtily he squared his bony shoulders inside the immense jacket and stepped into the elevator. He was ready for the second step of his private Operation Robot.

BACK on Earth it was a warm, misty spring day—the kind of day unknown to the planet Mars. Bella and Scribney, superb in new spring outfits, waited restlessly while the rocket cooled and the passengers recovered from deceleration.

"Look, Scrib!" Bella clutched Scribney's substantial arm. "It's finally opening."

They watched the airlock open and the platform wheel into place. They watched the passengers descend, looking a trifle dazed.

"There he is!" cried Bella. "Why, doesn't he look wonderful! Scrib, it's amazing! Look at him!"

And indeed, Harper was stepping briskly downward, looking spry and fit and years younger. He came across to them actually beaming. It was the first pleasant expression they had seen on his face in years.

"Well, you old dog!" exclaimed Scribney affectionately. "So you did it again!"

Harper smirked. "Yep, I turned a neat little deal. I bought out Hagerty's Enzymes and staffed the plant with the hotel's robots. Got both of 'em dirt cheap. Both concerns going bankrupt because they didn't have sense enough to swap their workers. Feel I owe you a bit for that tip about enzymes, Scrib, so I made out a block of stock to you. All right?"

"All right?" Scribney gulped. Why, the dried-up little turnip was human after all. "All right! Yes, sir! But aren't you going to use some of those robots for office help? Aren't they efficient and all that?"

Harper's smile vanished. "Don't even mention such a thing!" he yelled. "You don't know what you're saying! I lived with those things for weeks. I wouldn't have one around! Keep 'em in the factory where they belong!"

He glimpsed the composed, wonderfully human face of his secretary, waiting patiently in the background. "Oh there you are, Smythe." He turned to his relatives. "Busy day ahead. See you later, folks—"

"Same old Harp," observed Scribney. Then he thought of the block of stock. "What say we celebrate our rise to a position in the syndicate, honey?"

"Wonderful!" She squeezed his arm, and smiling at each other, they left the port.



MIRAGE FOR PLANET X

By STANLEY MULLEN

The prize was sealed, its contents unknown. Yet scavengers from a dozen barbaric Moons; adventurers from nameless, semi-explored asteroids, arrived for the deathless auction.

. . . To bid on Roper's notorious loot.

THEY were bringing in the prisoners who had escaped from Phobos. Sand skimmer ambulances had raced to the spaceport outside the terraced Martian city and waited. Dust devils danced on the wide, wind-whipped Martian plains. Grannar of the Police and his silent companion examined each body as it was lowered from the rescue ship.

Death anywhere is an ugly business. On Mars, you get used to bodies that never rot. Deep-freeze temperatures hold down decay bacteria, and the dry, cold air quickly des-

icates the tissue. Bodies turn into mummies that look and weigh like so much shredded wheat. But these corpses were worse—they were meaningless parodies that might never have been men. In primal disgust, Torry studied each one in turn, then shuddered and shook his head.

Grannar was tough minded, or stronger stomached. Police routines had taught him not to shudder.

"You can get used to this," he observed, enjoying Torry's revulsion. "Since you'd known Roper, we thought you could help



us identify him. Thanks for coming along."

"Had I a choice?" asked Torry bitterly.

The policeman's laugh was brutal, explosive. "There is always a choice. You can do as you're told or be dragged in screaming."

Torry grimaced. "Much more of this and I'll be dragged out screaming."

The prisoner-escapees, what was left of them, were an unpleasant sight. Explosive decompression in airless space does curious things to men's bodies. Blood boils in the veins and flesh bursts from internal pressures. Also, there are heat-cold curiosities, with half a body burnt raw on the sunward side, and the rest frozen iron-hard with a lacy overlay of snowflake patterns in red.

Holden was still alive, by a miracle. Forward compartments had held together when the makeshift spacer blew its flimsy self inside out. He was alive but not talking. They brought the bulging mass of pulped, purple flesh back to Mars and dumped it in a basket. There was no face, no eyes, no recognizable hands or feet. For the time that remained to him, Holden would be less than a functioning animal, fed by tube, cared for by people he could not see or hear, living a precarious existence on the raw, black fringe of life. Holden was through talking. And for any practical purpose, through living.

"Too bad," said Grannar, looking into the basket. "He could have told us about a lot of things . . . if he'd wanted to."

"Holden was a nice guy before he knew Bart Roper," Torry snapped angrily.

"You sound pretty bitter about Roper."

"I should be. I know him better than you do. I am bitter about Roper."

"Because of Holden?" pressed Grannar.

"Not . . . Holden. But it might as easily have been me in that basket. Six years ago I was Roper's partner. I got out quickly when I found out some of his business methods. And I had very little he could steal from me then. A lot of people have a variety of good reasons to hate Roper. Just say that I'm one of them."

Grannar whistled a Martian tune. The sound was shrill and eery in the thin air.

"You may as well ride back to the city in the police car with me," he suggested. "We can talk—"

"Talk!" blurted Torry. He swore savagely. "All this ugly business for nothing. You haven't found Roper yet. You don't even know if he made good his escape from your prison moon. In short, you don't know anything."

"True, up to a point," agreed the policeman quietly. "There are always many things I don't know. So I concentrate on the few things I do know. For example, you're very much interested in finding Roper. I'm wondering why. You can tell me about that on our way back to the city. About Roper himself, I know a few minor facts. Nobody has ever escaped from Phobos, the prison moon, but Roper may have managed it. With outside help, he got materials and fittings smuggled in to construct a scratch spacer. It blew up, as we know, but Roper may have expected that. In a good spacesuit, he could have survived. Since we still haven't found him, dead or alive, he's probably circling somewhere in a private orbit, waiting to be picked up."

"It could be a long wait. One man is hard to find in all that space."

"Not necessarily. A code transmitter powered by transuranic alloys would keep sending indefinitely. And Roper could have agreed upon being picked up at some point of a fixed orbit by his outside friends. We'll find him, I think. In the meantime, we have you . . . and some questions. Wait in my car. I'll be with you as soon as I thumbprint some papers."

TORRY stumbled across the barren sand wastes of the spaceport, pitted or glazed here and there by old take-off blasts. Without trouble he located the half track vehicle bearing police insignia. He got in and settled himself sourly to await Grannar's probing third degree. He meditated grimly on Roper, himself, and his reasons for coming to Mars. . . .

Had it only been last night he arrived? It seemed eternities ago. Coming in from Earth by short orbit express, green with deceleration sickness, he had wondered why he was in such a rush. After four years a cold trail would not get any colder. It had not, of course. It was hot when he arrived and had been getting hotter by the minute. Only the fact of being aboard the express at the

time of the prison break had cleared him in Grannar's eyes of being involved physically. And even that alibi did not erase suspicion from Grannar's suspicious nature.

Grannar was shrewd and deadly, a born hunter of men. Since the Martians never trust each other, most of the policing is done by hirelings from other planets. Grannar was an Earthman originally. But he was a long way from home, and twenty years on Mars had made him more Martian than the natives. He was hard, smart, dangerous, and a tough man to fool.

Torry had learned that at once last night.

But Grannar's return to the police car cut short his reverie. Torry watched the official cross the spaceport toward him, impressed by the lithe grace and sureness of movement over treacherous sand. Mars does something to a man who stays there. The body dries up and the soul withers, but if he survives, a man grows into something lean and leathery with pantherish strength and easy, poised motions.

Grannar vaulted to the driver's seat and slammed on power. With a skirl of steering runners, the half track took off toward the bubble city of New Chicago, named without tenderness by some long forgotten exile. Grannar drove with careless violence, but the half track skimmer shot among the dunes and low, lichen-clad hills without incident.

There is no truth to the charge that it takes as long to get from the spaceport to New Chicago as it does to reach Mars from Earth. But the distance is impressive and the going rough. Grannar talked as he drove, seeming casual, but his questioning had the same icy skill and unerring judgment.

"We'll start at the beginning," he said.

"There is no beginning," Torry jerked out angrily. "I got in last night. Fresh from the spaceport and customs, I put a coin in the public visiphone and asked Central Information about Roper. Central had no information and returned my coin. It was a police trap. Your men picked me up, searched me with a Geiger counter and found the coin. You keep faintly radioactive coins in the visiphone machines for Central to return when someone is curious about police business. It came out even. You found out I was curious about Roper,

and I found out he is police business, and his case is current. Do you think I'd be fool enough to call such attention to myself if I knew about Roper's prison break?"

"You might be. And it might be smart. That way you'd find out what the police knew and what they were doing. And it could be an alibi in case the breakout was delayed. We'll skip those possibilities for now. You were mulish last night about certain questions. I'm still not clear about why you are so desperate to find Roper. Why?"

Torry smiled coldly. "That's easy. I have to find him for a legal release. Preferably dead, which will make things easier for everybody. But if he's alive, I want his signature and prints on some papers."

"Why? What papers?"

Torry hesitated. "It's a touchy subject. A personal matter. Nothing to do with the police."

"I'll be the judge of that. Keep talking."

"Have you ever spent five years on an asteroid all by yourself?"

Grannar grunted. "Fortunately not. Twenty years on Mars is bad enough for me. Have you?"

Torry's face twisted in bitterness. "I have. I cracked up my one-man spacecan while prospecting in the asteroids. I was there five years until a survey ship happened by. There were minerals, low grade transuranics, but good enough to work when you had nothing else to do. I worked out the whole asteroid and had a good payload for the survey ship when it brought me back. Not a big fortune, but a stake that looked pretty good to me. I'm not rich now, but I can get along without skipping meals."

"What's the connection with Roper?"

"None in that part of it. I went prospecting after I'd dissolved my partnership with Roper. Times were bad, and I couldn't tie up with a decent job. There was a girl—"

"There usually is. Who was she?"

"Rose Mead, then. She promised to wait for me. She didn't. She's Roper's wife now. Not that I blame her too much. A year can be a long time, and five years is longer when you're a castaway on a small asteroid. Nothing to look at but a skyful of stars. Nothing to breathe but hydroponic-cycle air. No food but your homemade synthetics and the green stuff you grow in your chemi-

cal vats. You work and eat and sleep, and any idea can become an obsession. Sometimes it's one woman, sometimes an imaginary harem. I had a 3-d picture of Rose. It helped to hold me together, or maybe it just channeled an idea that was bound to go haywire."

"You're beginnin' to make sense," commented Grannar. "So you have an obsession about Roper's wife?"

"I call it that. But I figure that all my money is not worth much if it won't buy just one thing I've dreamed about for five long years. There's a technicality about divorcing a man who's away from Earth, in space. Rose is funny about it. But she's agreed that her marriage was a mistake. She'll marry me if I can prove Roper is dead, or can get a release from him."

"Is the girl worth all this trouble?"

TORRY grinned cynically. "Probably not. But Rose is a good, sound, practical minded girl. Maybe my money looks good to her. Roper left her four years ago with hardly any resources. For myself, after five years of dream stuff, a solid human girl like Rose looks pretty good. Dream stuff looks fragile, but it's mighty tough eating for a daily diet."

"So you want to find Roper. Preferably dead, you say. Does that include pushing him off a cliff if you find him?"

Torry snorted. "It could. That depends on Roper."

The policeman echoed the snort. "Roper is dangerous. You may have forgotten how tricky and ruthless he can be. Sounds to me like hunting a tiger with a butterfly net."

Torry smiled viciously. "Even that can be done . . . if the net is big enough and strong enough. I'm counting on a curious twist in Roper's mind. I'm a challenge to him—the one man so far he failed to swindle or corrupt. He pulled a fast one about Rose, but he knows I wasn't there to fight back. It galls him. And if he knows I'm here; alive, and looking for him, maybe he'll find me and try to wipe out the one flaw in his record."

Grannar shot a glance of grudging admiration, but shook his head. "At the moment, I wouldn't count on it. He'll be busy and we'll see to it that he is. But if you

want to go looking for him, maybe I can help you."

"Do you know where he is?"

"No, but I can give you some hints where to look."

"Why?" Torry was baffled.

"Two reasons. Maybe more, but two will do. I'm a cop, so I hate men like Roper. If he's on Mars I'll get him sooner or later because I'm a good cop. And it's my job. I hate crooks, so I'll kill him or catch him and send him to Phobos for keeps. The second reason is that I hate Mars. It's a tough world—what government there is is corrupt and vicious. Offend the wrong people or stir things up, and you're out without your pension. You can even get hurt. I want out while I'm still ahead, with enough money to go back to Earth and live decently. And so far I haven't that kind of money."

"I don't see the connection," protested Torry.

Grannar's bushy eyebrows crawled up and down like caterpillars.

"There's big money in this Roper business. There has to be for anyone to take the risk of arranging a breakout from Phobos that costs plenty."

"Roper must have something pretty good this time to attract help like that. What is it?"

Grannar shrugged. "I don't know. My guess is transuranics—the heavy metals beyond uranium in the atomic table; the stuff that powers planets. Without it our whole economy breaks down, and we can't even afford to make air for places like Mars. But you've mined it yourself. You know how rare and valuable it is."

"I know," said Torry. "You think Roper has a new source?"

"Maybe that, and maybe he's discovered or stolen a cheaper way to process or transport it."

"It figures," admitted Torry. "Roper was always interested in transuranics, and always looking for a squeeze play like that. He'd be able to make his own terms, wouldn't he? Including squaring the charges against him?"

"Just about any terms he dictated," grated the detective.

"Why tell me this?"

Grannar's eyes narrowed. "You want

Roper for your own good reasons. I want him for mine. My hands are tied but yours are not. If you want him, go after him. I'll help, short of risking my job. I'm offering to make a deal with you. It occurs to me that a couple of smart men could make a real killing by knowing the right time to buy a few shares of stock in transuranics. A man like me might even make enough to retire to Earth, comfortably."

"You're beginning to make sense," said Torry. "What makes you so sure I'll cut you in for a slice?"

Grannar laughed harshly. "My nuisance value, for one thing. My usefulness for another. I'm an honest cop. But there's nothing in the rule book that says I can't pick up valuable information on the side while I'm doing my job. And nothing that says I can't put pressure on you to help me do it. Besides, why should you balk at doing me a favor when you're doing yourself one at the same time?"

"I'm still listening."

"New to Mars, aren't you?"

"New enough. I've been here before, but a long time ago and not for long then. Why?"

"Do you know anything about the local set-up, the governments?"

"Not much. It's a kind of anarchy, I think. The big companies and even the labor racketeers have private armies like the old goon squads. Legal government is just a front for feudal gangs, with the police sitting politely on the lid. Lobbies and pressure groups are the real bosses. Is that right?"

GRANNAR whistled his aimless Martian tune. "You said it. I didn't. Not out loud. I never even think it in a room that might have microphones or scanners. Mars is interesting, beautiful, with shreds and tatters of an old, picturesque culture clinging to ivy-patterns to the new, modern, cosmopolitan, industrial set-up. It says that in the books and travel ads. Out here in the clean and lifeless air of a worn-out planet I can have the precarious luxury of hating it. I want out, and you're going to help me get out."

"Why stay anyhow?"

"Because I'm a cop and it's the only job

I know. And bad as it is, it's better than nothing. You've heard the yarn of the brash young rookie in Earth's Sahara City, the guy famous for arresting the police commissioner's daughter. I'm that cop. I hung a ticket on her for traffic violation. It turned out she was drunk and speeding away from an accident that killed somebody. The mess was too ugly to hush up, so she went to prison and I went to the sticks for keeps. I resigned and came here. So I learned to keep my mouth shut, do as I was told, and never to move an inch out of line with the people who count."

"You're breaking my heart," Torry said bitterly. "Go on."

"Roper's not alone in this. Somebody with money and political influence arranged that escape, probably picked him up off the wreck. Before he went to Phobos he was mixed up with Trans-Uranic Miners Union, and also with a Martian pressure group headed by old Sen Bas, the importer. He may still be. I want no trouble with either. With you it doesn't matter. Maybe you'll dig up a lot of interesting facts before you get yourself killed."

"Get to the point."

"Spacefreight. Two large boxes consigned to Roper and Holden, his partner. Still unopened, held in the unclaimed spacefreight warehouse. Charges are high and Roper was broke. He tried to get money from Trans-U and the Martians, but neither was buying a pig in a poke. Not then. Maybe they are now. He must have convinced his backers, somehow. But they can't get the space crates either unless I say so. Roper and his pal tried robbery to raise money and landed on Phobos. I put the crates under police seal."

"Why weren't they condemned and opened?"

"Too much red tape and money. The transport company can sell the stuff legally for charges, but only at public auction, unopened, and bids start at charges plus storage. Are you interested?"

Torry frowned. "My funds are not unlimited. . . ."

"That's a chance we'll both have to take. I'm taking a chance on you anyhow, but don't try any smart tricks. I always cover bets. The boxes will be officially released for

tomorrow's auction. All I ask is a look inside at Roper's gimmick, whatever it is, so I'll know whether to buy transuranics or not. If you buy the boxes the contents are yours. Fair enough?"

Torry grunted. "If they sell low enough you'll get your look after I've had mine."

"See that I do," warned Grannar. "And a word of advice. You can't import weapons to Mars, but there's no law says you can't buy one here and sleep with it. Shall I drop you at your hotel?"

The half track was nearing the domed city. A gigantic half bubble of polarized plastic rose from the plain to enclose both the old Martian town and the bustling, strident metropolis of New Chicago. From the desert the dome was nearly invisible, but the architectural jumbles looked like a forest of lighted Christmas trees appearing by magic in the swift dusk of the red planet.

Torry grinned. "You're forgetting I spent my first night in jail."

Grannar scoffed, "Routine, one in jail, one in a hotel, the next in the morgue. . . ."

II

AN AUCTION of unclaimed, refused or damaged spacefreight held more surprises and excitements than a Martian wedding. All shipments were sold "as is, unopened," which offered endless possibilities to a daring purchaser.

Anything could pop out of a sealed space crate when the container was broken into, and sometimes it did, literally. One unlucky bidder got seven full grown grull cats, shipped from Venus in suspended animation. His purchase caused seven minor riots until company guards with gas guns could subdue the savage killers. Loot from a dozen inhabited worlds and a hundred half explored moons and asteroids littered the floor or spilled from damaged cases.

Bids ran high and two dozen small fortunes changed hands as Lots 1 to 24 went up at auction and were knocked down. Any bid on unclaimed freight was a gamble, the one form not taxed to death by a greedy government. And the inhabitants of New Chicago were gamblers, or they would not have been there. The crowd was mixed and

polyglot; human and half-human species rubbed elbows and tempers to a fine frenzy.

"Lot 25," sang the auctioneer. "Who'll open?"

To avoid attracting attention, Torry had bid half-heartedly on several previous items, breathing a sigh of relief when bids pyramided and the lots sold to someone else.

This time, he merely sparked off the bidding, only to have a Martian importer jump down his throat with an offer of twice the amount. Torry dropped out as the bidding climbed in dizzy spirals, and the shipment went to the impatient Martian for the price of a small spaceline. Laughter rippled over the auction lofts as the boxes were opened and found to contain forty small air conditioners of a type useless on Mars.

Lot 26 sold badly after that disappointment. It proved to be a treasure of rare luminous birds from Venus, and collectors immediately offered the fortunate purchaser triple his money for the lot.

"Lot 27," roared the auctioneer before excitement could die down. "Two large boxes to be sold separately. No information on these . . . except that they were held overtime in storage and have just been released from police seal. The space crates are undamaged. Who'll open?"

Torry felt like a small child back on Earth, clutching moist bronze pennies in his hot, grimy fist as he ran to the corner candy store. Nerves and muscles contracted in his throat. He opened his mouth but no sound came out.

"Fifty credits," shouted the Martian who had bought Lot 25. "I want to recoup my losses." He stared belligerently at Torry.

Somebody else doubled the bid.

Torry found a shadow of his voice and redoubled. Grinning evilly, the Martian raised again, but not before he shot a wary glance across the room. Torry met the challenge, then following the direction of the Martian's glance, he spotted a Martian girl standing near the doorway. She was so swathed in blue Venusian spidersilk as to be practically invisible, and there was time for only a general impression. But Torry did not miss the head-nod signal, instructing the Martian male to bid for her. After the man's previous performance, Torry braced himself for spirited competition.

Up and up went the bids . . . astronomically.

At twenty thousand credits the Martian hesitated for an automatic mute appeal to the feminine figure. The girl nodded again, but that moment's doubt cost the Martian.

". . . Third and last time. Sold to the Earthman . . . for twenty thousand credits."

Torry swallowed hard. He saw the girl glide toward him through the crowd, moving as smoothly and silently as a ghost.

Like a maniac the Martian charged to the platform, croaking a loud protest. Arguments became heated, voices were raised in harsh clamor, then blows struck. Grinning, Torry watched the scramble. A knot of uniformed company guards surged around the battling Martian and hustled him from the auction rooms. A gas gun was used finally to subdue the raging sportsman. While Torry waited for attendants to bring him the box and his purchase receipts, he looked again for the girl but she had melted into the crowd.

Interest was now roused to a high pitch. The auctioneer went into his spiel in whatever alien language auctioneers use, and it was only by knowing in advance what was being said that anyone could make sense of the garble.

". . . Other half of Lot 27," droned the husky voice. "How about a thousand credits to open?"

"One thousand," Torry bid hoarsely.

He felt sweaty and feverish at the same time. Mentally he calculated his remaining resources. A little more of this, and the show would be out of his price class.

Bidding was rapid. In jumps the price went up from twenty to thirty thousand. The Martian's hysteria seemed to have infected everyone. At thirty-five thousand, bidding slowed.

"Thirty-six thousand," Torry bid.

MOMENTS lengthened and Torry's breath came slowly back. It was the absolute limit of his available cash, and the auction terms were cash on the spot. Numbly, he realized that his bid, if it were accepted, used up more than half of his fortune from five years of lonely work.

"Thirty-seven thousand," offered a bull-throated voice. And a barrel-bodied mine

owner from Iobololy thrust himself forward as if to give authority to his bid.

Torry had shot his wad. He could not raise the bid, and it meant loss of the second box. Slowly, the starch dissolved out of him and he let his excitement wilt.

With bidding so high, the auctioneer was not impatient. He studied Torry hopefully. The moment extended. The gavel raised, slammed down.

"Going once."

A thrusting hand delved into Torry's pocket where he clutched grimly at his sheaf of paper credits. For an awful moment he thought his pocket was being picked. Then crisp, rustling paper bulged his pocket, and realization bulged his eyes. There was no time for thought or argument. In blind confusion, he drew out a packet of paper money and stared at it. A cruel fist jabbed into Torry's ribs.

"Going twice . . . at thirty-seven thousand."

"Forty thousand!" screamed Torry.

Bids climbed again, to fifty thousand, to fifty-five, then to sixty. At sixty-two thousand, the fat man from Io gave up.

"Sold," droned the auctioneer. "I hope the man from Earth has the money, and his money's worth. Now, Lot 28, five cases, one broken open. The rest . . ."

Torry did not hear any more. He turned and stared blankly at a vision in blue spider-silk. Gossamer fabric so swathed the girl, covering so densely in so many folds, that she had no more form than an ear of corn. A face showed dimly through layers of diaphanous cloth, but no features were clear enough to have real definition.

"Who are you?" gasped Torry.

"Your partner." The voice, as smooth and silken as the garments, seemed bodiless, but it suggested purringly that the girl was not. "Don't be so obvious about it. We won't open the boxes here. Hire men to move our loot and I'll have a robotruck waiting outside the freight doors in five minutes. Be there."

Torry nodded dumbly. She vanished again, so quickly that he almost wondered if he had imagined her. But her money was real enough. He fumbled it, paying grim-faced attendants, then hired men to move the heavy crates to the freight elevator. At

street level, with the boxes blocking most of the entrance, he waited.

A wheeled robotruck quickly appeared and the girl descended the ramp. Like a blue fury, she directed the men and had the space crates loaded in a brace of minutes. Then a hand snaked out from the fabric folds.

"Half of eighty-two thousand is forty-one thousand," she said. "We can settle up now."

"Half of sixty-two thousand," objected Torry.

"You don't know me very well," she murmured. "It has to be all or nothing."

The gun against his stomach decided Torry. "Don't be like that. You win. He shrugged. "I guess we're both taking a chance at that. Forty-one thousand is a heavy investment in curiosity."

The gun vanished. "You've no idea how much of a chance we're taking," she mused aloud. "People are curious. Yo Tyal is a fool, and I didn't dare attract attention by bidding myself. Half of the Trans-U Miners' goon squad was at that auction just watching me. You should know what that means."

"Should I?"

"You should—if you don't. But we can't stand here talking like moonstruck lovers. Not unless we're tired of living. Which is it, partner, me or the goon squad?"

"You, I guess," Torry laughed grimly. "Though if I'd known about the goon squad I'd have given you less argument."

Her head tossed under the myriad veils of spidersilk. She scrambled aboard the robotruck and pressed the motor stud. "Come on, then," she ordered sharply.

The truck was in motion almost before Torry could leap to the seat beside her.

Going at suicidal speed through the twisting alleyways of the old city, Torry felt hopelessly confused and lost. Worse, the girl kept glancing over her shoulder, and her driving suffered. It was reckless enough at best.

"You drive," Torry urged. "Unless you're psychic you can't watch where you're going and where we've just been. If anything's following us, it's probably just an ambulance looking for business."

"Make sure," she ordered breathlessly.

At first Torry could distinguish nothing but a blurred rush of shadowy buildings whirling away behind them as if being drawn toward some colossal whirlpool. But he sensed pursuit, just as the girl had, perhaps because she seemed to expect it. Then he saw two huge dark vehicles race into view just before she swerved the robotruck around a corner and shut off rear vision.

"We are being followed," he grudged. "Now where, partner?"

"Home, I had thought," she said. "But we'll never make it. And I don't want those wolves going through our place. It's bad enough without that."

THE robotruck hit a straight stretch. Pencil beams of light licked out from the street-shadows behind. Fire flowers blossomed, but the noise of heavy explosions was lost in the roar of racing motors. Showers of dust and flakes of fiery, disintegrating masonry deluged the careening robotruck.

Hurling around a blind corner, the truck aimed itself into a narrow opening between buildings. Metal ground and screamed in abrasive contact with stone but the robotruck rebounded and careened down side alleys, around sharp corners, and over moving walks fortunately deserted. With the nerveless skill of an old trucker, the girl wrestled some sanity into the vehicle and chose her route from the most unlikely possibilities. At last, after a sprint through a tangle of dark avenues and narrow alleys she brought the robotruck to a brake melting halt in the deep shadow of high, blank-faced buildings.

"See what I mean?" she said, voice loud and shrill in the silence that seemed deafening with the motor cut out.

Shuddering, the girl crouched behind the seat shield and fumbled inside her garment for the gun, alert for signs of pursuit.

"Relax," advised Torry. "We're alone for the moment. Wherever we are."

"It's an abandoned warehouse. Belongs to my grandfather," she gasped. "Can you get those boxes inside with only me to help."

"Of course, if there's tackle, some wheels and a ramp."

With a coded light-key the girl opened heavy doors and got necessary equipment. Fortunately, she was stronger than she

looked, and about as fragile as steel wire. She gave Torry no more mercy than she gave herself. It was still a mean job.

Inside the vast, echoing interior, Torry and his companion seemed as unimpressive as ants in an auditorium. Huge, vaulted lofts were dusty with disuse. The huge cubes of the space crates looked like unmarked dice, rolled by giants, and forgotten.

Torry was tired and irritable. "I've played along with you," he said. "Now that we're here I'd like some facts. Because of the boxes, I'll assume your connection with Roper. Who are you, and what is all this about?"

"Don't you know?" demanded the girl. Laughing an icy trill, she threw back the veiling spidersilk from head and face, bunching the material neatly behind her neck. Her face was oddly elfin, and distorted to curious proportions by the Martian half-mask of delicately etched glass. Wide set eyes of periwinkle blue tilted at the corners, and the smile of her sword-slash mouth was both teasing and disarming. Torry was suddenly glad that there had been no such face as hers to remember during his five-year exile.

"I'm Tharol Sen," she murmured. "My grandfather is Sen Bas, the Martian importer. Does that explain anything?"

"It may," said Torry, "but not to me. I'm a stranger here, myself. Long ago I was Roper's partner. We heard he was dead. You might say I'm acting for his estate."

"Roper is still alive, very much alive. And don't worry, he can look after his own affairs."

An ugly thought struck Torry, then, though he had gnawed at the idea before. "You don't happen to be one of his affairs?"

Her smile vanished. The dark hair swirled like black smoke as she tossed her head. Her eyes turned dark and cold with the arrogant pride of her ancient race.

"That was a bad choice of words, partner," she said with a haughty stare. "I have promised to marry Bart Roper."

Anger surged hotly in Torry.

"Bad choice of words for you, not me. Roper can't marry you or anyone else. 'Whatever arrangement you have—' He stopped. 'Did he happen to mention a wife

back on Earth?' He hoped the flash of resentment in him was for Rose, not for himself.

"Roper said she was dead," the girl answered. "Perhaps he believes she is dead. In any case, it doesn't matter. Martian law does not recognize marriages on other planets. He can pay her off and I'll see that he forgets her."

"Perhaps." Torry mastered himself. "I'd still like to know what I paid all those credits for."

"Why not open the boxes and find out?"

FROM a trapdoor locker she brought tools, an atomic torch and a huge wrecking bar. The boxes yielded easily to persuasion.

The first box, which was smaller, contained an assortment of lenses. Banks of atomic-electric batteries hooked up into an intricate arrangement of copper wire coils did not explain any puzzles. Nor did the contents of the larger case, which were mainly a folding framework of metal suspending endless layers of foil or metalcloth too finely woven for the eye to follow. The foil or fabric was eerie stuff, as unsubstantial as curdled moonlight. Like liquid mercury, it seemed almost alive as it crawled away from the touch.

"I thought the only mirages you could buy came in bottles," commented Torry unhappily.

"Don't be a fool," rasped the girl in a strange tone. "It is a mirage . . . for Planet X. I thought you knew more since you knew Roper. But I'll stand by my agreement. All or nothing, both ways. I'd better explain. And now that you're in, try to act intelligent. I'll tell you all I can, then we'd better get this equipment to . . . to my grandfather before anything else happens."

A buzzer near the metal sliding doors droned a warning. The girl's face turned upward toward a blinking red alarm light.

"I'd say something was already happening," said Torry.

"Someone's in the alley outside," gasped Tharol Sen. "It can't be the police. They wouldn't dare interfere."

"Then who?"

"Probably Ferax of Trans-U Miners Union. Or his strong-arm squad. If they

find us here with . . . with that they'll kill both of us. I don't know what to do."

"Why don't you stop fooling with that silly blaster gun? Give it to me and find yourself a hole to crawl in. This is my department. Let me do the worrying."

She laughed. "I might do just that." She handed over her pop-gun. It was a typical woman's weapon, squat, flat and short-barreled. Up close it could vaporize a man, but it would have no range worth mentioning. Torry grinned at it in contempt. Motioning her out of the line of fire, he crouched behind the wrecked crates.

A heavy crash echoed through the cavern-like vaults as force was applied to the metal doors. But the doors were dur-steel, two inches thick. They held, but the interior reverberated with harsh metallic clangor. Two more blows sounded, then a lengthening silence. A circle of redness glowed incandescent on the metal, spreading over the panels like spilled paint. Waves of heat sprang outward. Heat haze danced in the cool air as visible vibrations of blinding crimson radiated from the softening door. Runnels of melting steel channeled the metal surface, dripping to spatter on floor.

The girl was busy with something, but with his eyes riveted on the door, Torry could not spare her any attention. He imagined she might be trying to hide the contents of the boxes.

"They'll be through in a minute," she whispered.

Torry nodded. Drops of water splashed down suddenly. Torry felt it on hands and face, glanced upward. Rain, inside a building in a domed city! He must be crazy. But it was real. Drops became a deluge, slashing down in increasing torrents. Water sizzled on the incandescent door, and clouds of steam burst upward, obscuring everything. Pools formed, joined. In moments the floor was inches deep in water.

"Automatic sprinklers," said the girl. "Set for any upward shift of temperature."

Steam clouds cleared. A needle of light burned through. In rifts, Torry saw the door dissolve, slide suddenly into a bubbling, spitting mass that spread in fiery rush across the floor. In wild rush came dark figures, dancing gingerly to avoid tongues of hot metal. Torry fired carefully.

He kept finger on stud until the blaster charge was used up. He flung the useless weapon. But the dark figures were gone. The doorway, with sagging leaves of soft metal, was empty.

"That's all, sister," he said, turning.

She was gone. Something like a blue flash whisked out of vision. There was only the metal framework supporting a cylinder of the woven quicksilver. And, as he watched, it vanished.

More dark figures blocked the doorway. They came at him in a surge of reckless violence. He stood up and met them with empty hands. Then darkness struck through his brain.

III

TORRY opened one eye cautiously. He was in bed, a soft bed with clean linens. Beside the bed loomed a monstrous figure. Something that might have been, and was, a Venusian type-R mutant. It seemed not quite human, and big even for a Venusian. But it was not a stranger.

"Ferax!" whispered Torry, opening both eyes.

"It's been a long time," said the Venusian in thick accents.

"Not long enough."

Ferax laughed brutally. His head was a hairless globe of coarse leather, into which some humorist had punched a parody of human features while the material was still pliable. Nothing about Ferax looked pliable now.

"You're still tough, Torry. And you're keeping fast company these days. But you'll never learn to work with your brain instead of your fists or a gun."

Torry smiled with bruised, pulpy lips. "Look who's talking. You're getting soft, Ferax. Last time your boys worked over Roper and me we couldn't walk or talk for a week. And I hear you're in fast company yourself since you gave up strike-breaking and took over union racketeering. You may be a big name now, but you're as ugly as ever. And to me, you'll always smell like the skunk in the perfume works."

Ferax bellowed happily. "Smells are more subtle in higher brackets, that's all. In a stinking world, nobody smells too pretty.

Not even you, and certainly not your girl friend—or is she Roper's?"

"Tharol Sen? Roper's, I guess. You'll have to ask them. I barely saw the girl myself. I just got in night before last, spent a day answering questions for the police, then rested up one night before buying myself a package of trouble. Nobody tells me anything, so I'll have to guess. Is Roper behind this rat race?"

Ferax grunted. "I could almost believe you don't know. So I'll tell you. He's in with a Martian power grab. They need transuranic metals to power their underground cities. The stuff is scarce and expensive. Everyone's looking for new sources and we'll have to find some soon or our whole economy will break down. The Martians are in the same jam, desperate."

"Roper has a new source?"

"Not new. We all know where the metals are. Neptune's big moon, Triton. And Pluto. The trouble is getting them out."

Torry shook his head. "But you've mined under bad conditions before. Triton and Pluto should be no worse than some."

"Not the mining. Transportation. Freight rates from Pluto or Triton would eat up all the profits. And take too much time. Who wants to spend twelve years hauling in one shipload of ore? The answer is, nobody. The Martians can afford the money since they're already paying top rates for whatever we can supply. But we think Roper has a short cut for transportation—"

"If he has I'd better get in with him. Sounds like a very good profit."

Ferax chuckled. "I know better than that. You and Roper hate each other worse than you hate me. Besides, I can offer a better deal. He'll only swindle you out of your cut, and you know it. Throw in with me and you'll stay alive, plus a slice of whatever I take."

"Are you serious about that? If so, I'll have to think it over. Is there any use asking you where I can find Roper?"

"No use at all," said Ferax, grinning. "I don't know. If I did, I'd go there after him. If you do I'll have you followed. You always did have a genius for picking the losing side, which makes it a pleasure to fight you. You're free to go as soon as you're strong enough. If you decide to play things

my way, let me know. I'll give you a pass, day or night. Getting into union headquarters is like breaking into the mint. I live like a minor king, and the place is a fort."

Torry snorted. "It's probably safer that way, when so many people hate your guts."

Ferax shrugged. "For that compliment I'll give you some free advice. Don't tell the police about that shooting fray in the warehouse. You're nobody, and the police would love to clear the union and your Martian twirp by using you for scapegoat. You or the girl killed six of my best hardheads. Also, if you see her or old Sen Bas, watch yourself. They're both trickier than snakes and a lot more poisonous."

"One thing more," said Torry. "What happened to the girl?"

Ferax opened eyes wide. "You tell me. She was gone, along with the stuff from the boxes. My men found you sprawled out unconscious from a blow on the head. You were suckered, friend. Suckered."

Ferax produced a metal ident card impregnated with coded electronic inks. "This will keep you out of jail if your cop friend has any such ideas. Also, it will get you in here to see me anytime, day or night, if you change your mind."

Torry laughed, but accepted the card uneasily. "That will be the day or night. . . ."

LIKE all police stations, the building reeked of unwashed bodies and harsh disinfectants. In Grannar's office, Torry faced out the storm.

"Amateur!" said Grannar in disgust. "Why did I ever get mixed up with you?"

Torry glared back at him. "Our lovey-dovey arrangement is brittle enough to break off any time you want it that way."

Grannar shook himself like a wet dog. "Not yet. Whether you know it or not, you did pick up some interesting facts. I guess Tharol Sen has tricked smarter men than you. And she'll probably keep that partnership bargain, since Martians are funny about honor in a business deal. Since she was the one at the auction we can assume that the Martians picked up Roper from the wrecked escape ship and that he's alive."

"I'm sure she knows where Roper is," said Torry. "Now if I knew where to find her—"

"That's easy enough," Grannar told him acidly. "Her grandfather has a big place in the old Martian sector, about twenty acres on the surface and Thol knows how many cubic miles of tunnels and cellars underground. He calls himself an importer, and after his own quaint way, he is. Any vice for a price. Sen Bas' Garden of Delights is a combination gambling den, freak show, amusement park, carnival and emporium of forbidden drugs and narcotic liquors. We've tried raiding the joint but gave that up. Too risky, with their mines and booby traps, and the Martians just scamper into the holes and get lost. Below ground is a rabbit warren of caverns and tunnels and vaults that used to be for growing and curing mushrooms and commercial molds. We know the girl is there, somewhere, but—"

"But you're afraid to go in after her?"

"Not quite that. If ordered on regular police business I'd go poking into even that Martian hornet's nest. But we have nothing on her or Sen Bas, and only a suspicion that Roper's hiding there. Since you muffed something easy, like the auction, I doubt if you could manage to get in, let alone locate her or Roper."

"Who says I muffed anything?" demanded Torry irritably. "I know what was in the boxes, though I didn't tell the girl I knew. It's a matter transmitter, the only one in the Solar System. An inventor back on Earth was knocked on the head and his working model stolen. He's alive, but has lost his memory, and the plans were taken along with the model. Roper's big secret is stolen property, but getting it back may be a problem. I didn't guess what it was till the girl used it to escape from the warehouse. Probably they want the thing to bring back heavy metal ores from Triton or Pluto. I've learned more in three days than you did in four years."

Grannar bowed sardonically. "Oh, sure. I apologize. And now I'm sure you can lay hands on a man with a perfect escape method—from anywhere to anywhere. The ratholes were bad enough, but this really does it."

"The girl is still a good lead," said Torry quietly. "I'm going after her. Are you, or do I have to ask help from Ferax?"

"Suit yourself about Ferax. I won't risk

my job on a chance Roper might be there—"

"How much is your job worth?" asked Torry, with a sneer.

Grannar's face twitched. "For half that dough you threw away at the auction, I could buy a plankton farm on Earth. . . ."

Torry licked his lips and left. Back at the hotel he cashed a bank draft and put twenty thousand credits in currency into an envelope with a note and sent it to Grannar. The note began:

I've always wanted to buy a policeman. Now you can afford to do your job. I'm seeing Ferax first, but with or without his help, I'm going after Roper.

Terse instructions followed. Torry did not expect too much of Grannar, but the man represented law and authority as far as either existed on Mars, and dealing with Roper, Ferax, and the Martians all at once was scarcely a one-man job.

TRANS-U MINERS UNION housed itself in a citadel remarkable even on Mars. It occupied the center of a large area, cleared, floodlighted and surrounded by a charged wire fence. Inside the defense circle were booby traps triggered for the first careless step off marked pathways patrolled by robot guards. Torry's metal ident card got him through the gateway by tripping electronic relays, and each incorruptible robot guard passed him after being shown the card.

At the building doorway he had to satisfy a series of dubious and hard bitten human questioners, but his pass and the magic name of Ferax got him inside.

Doors opened. Robot voices directed him across echoing lobbies to a bank of elevators. In a locked cage he descended five floors below surface level. In the corridor another bodiless voice spoke:

"End of the hall. Door on the right."

Torry followed directions. The ritual was getting on his nerves. His footsteps echoed hollowly. The place smelled damp and moldy as a tomb. Opening the door on the right with a wave of his keyed pass, he realized that it was, in a sense, a tomb. There was a body in it. A dead body.

Ferax sprawled across an ornate desk of Venusian chibar wood and kru-leather.

Luminous particles from a blaster discharge still danced in the air. A lingering bite of charred, exploding flesh stung the nostrils. There was little left of the torso, but a lolling globular head identified the corpse. A discarded gun clanked as Torry's foot kicked it. He hesitated, then picked it up and renewed the charge. It was an automatic reflex of defense, and fingerprint evidence was not likely to matter now. If found on the spot he would have little chance for explanations.

The thing had happened only minutes ago. Whoever did it, the killer must still be close at hand. A roving flicker of pale radiance warned Torry that a scanner was in use. By whom? From where? No complex mental processes were needed to convince Torry that he was in a bad spot. The goon squads were notorious for acting first and asking questions afterwards.

Getting into the citadel to see Ferax had been interesting enough. Getting out again promised to be more so. If he ever got out.

The office door was opening slowly. Silently Torry glided behind it. Reaching around it, he snatched cloth and flesh and dragged a struggling form into the room.

"Tharol Sen!" The girl was panting, her periwinkle eyes wide and glazed with horror.

Torry subdued her writhings by jamming the blaster muzzle hard into her flesh.

"Talk low," he ordered. "But talk fast. Why did you kill Ferax?"

"I didn't. I found him like that, just a moment ago. I heard the blaster and looked in quickly. Then I hid in the office across. I heard something and came back here. That's all I know." Her voice ended on a wail.

Torry jerked up the elfin face and studied it savagely. For some reason he believed her. But there was more to explain, even if someone else had killed the labor racketeer, and little time for explanations.

"How did you get in here?" he snapped. "And why?"

She threw back her head in a characteristic gesture. Her eyes sparkled.

"Roper had come here. He was so long

that I got worried. I came through. . . ." She stopped talking suddenly.

"Through the transmitter? I know about it, so you can call it by the right name."

Tharol Sen nodded numbly.

"That means Roper killed him."

The girl jerked angrily. "Bart Roper wouldn't do that. He wouldn't kill an unarmed man. Probably you killed him, and just want to throw the blame on . . . on us."

Torry ignored her. "Roper would be too smart to leave any evidence. So I'll leave it for him." From his pocket he took a small lighter with a name engraved on it, quickly scrubbed it free of prints and dropped it on the floor as if it had fallen in the excitement of murder. It would not carry conviction, but it would be proof of Roper's presence and his reputation would do the rest.

"You fool," said Tharol Sen. "I'm a witness, and I saw you do that. I'll testify."

"Do that," taunted Torry viciously, "if it ever comes to a trial. Who'll believe you? And I don't think the strong arm boys will wait for a trial. If you can get back through that transmitter screen, we'd better do it before someone finds us here."

"Take you?" she snarled. "I'd rather die here."

"You have that choice."

She changed her mind. Torry did not misread the flash of wicked triumph on her face. He did not have to.

"All right," she yielded. "Bart Roper will know how to take care of you. Come ahead, if you dare. The transmitter screen is in the opposite office."

Torry sighed bitterly. "I'll chance Roper. I've already had one session with the goons."

THE quicksilver screen was three-dimensional, and possibly four, since it seemed to exist in two places at once and linked them without regard to intervening distance. It was a hollow cylinder supported by metal framework, and the insubstantial fabric glowed and pulsed with electrical current. Inside was darkness and a sense of infinite space. Walking through the odd fabric one encountered nothing material, but a prickling touched every skin surface, then soaked through the bone centers.

Leaving the force field of the screen was

more exhilarating, and almost painful. It was like breaking an electrical contact; muscles jerked spasmodically, hair stood on end, and hot sparks discharged from any moist portions of the skin. Torry had not realized how drenched his body was in cold sweat. He stepped out, gasping.

He stepped into paradise, or hell. Unreality.

Martian subcellar gardens are startling to outsiders. In the air was the bitter tang of narcotic incense. Smoke distorted vision. Nightmarish fantasies of mobile murals in rich colors writhed on the walls. The ceiling was an illusion of sky and stars, complete with intricacies of celestial mechanics, and the flooring resembled grassy sward, set with miniature pools and cool, gurgling streams, crossed by arching bridges of carved and tined ivory. Singing birds and trilling winged serpents filled the air with sound and motion. Luminous bubbles rose and burst above lighted, musical fountains. Musicians toyed with the acrid melodies of ancient Mars, and only close inspection proved the dancing girls 3-d projections.

It was a painstaking reproduction, pitiful and exquisite, of the richly barbaric and luxuriant youth of a now-dying planet. To a Martian, it would have been nostalgic and lovely. To Torry, fresh from the scent of blood and death, it was a garish mockery, like a painted corpse.

Torry recoiled painfully, both from the setting and from the living man who seemed part of it.

Sen Bas was as dried and shriveled as a Martian mummy. Only his eyes seemed alive.

"You can put away your gun," said Sen Bas, his wrinkled face a mask of malicious humor. "You are in no danger here."

Oddly, there was no feeling of menace, and Torry found himself putting away his weapon. Will power beat from Sen Bas as it does from hypno machines, and his personality held fearful compulsion.

"But he's—" began Tharol Sen hysterically.

Still smiling, Sen Bas nodded like a bizarre doll with a swinging pendulum attached to its head. "No matter. Since we made a deal with Roper when we picked him up off Phobos, we must do as he says

... in some matters. Roper has gone ahead. He wants this man, Torry, sent to him ... there. There is use for him ... where Roper has gone. Until then, he is our guest, and we must show him every courtesy."

Torry studied the old man calmly. "You can use place names, Sen Bas. I know about the transuranics on Triton and Pluto. But how could Roper have gone ahead when we were using the transmitter? It can't be three places at once."

Sen Bas frowned. "No, it cannot. Unfortunately, it has many limitations. This is a second model copied by my engineers for study and experiment. To our distress we have learned that ores of the heavy metals cannot be transmitted since their radioactivity has an effect on the force field. But now, with trouble coming, this model must be destroyed."

From a pouch Sen Bas drew a tiny subsonic whistle upon which he blew a soundless note. Martian technicians quickly appeared. Sen Bas issued commands, and the transmitter was rapidly dismantled and removed to incinerators.

"Good idea," approved Torry. "Ferax is dead. The police—"

"I know. The transmitter is not as instantaneous as it seems to the user. Time also is distorted, as well as space. Hours have passed. You are the last person known to have seen Ferax, so you are wanted by the police and others for questioning. I was not certain you would come through the screens, so my agents are scouring the city for you. Roper has gone ahead to Triton, and wants you to join him there where we can make contact."

"How long will that take?"

Sen Bas blinked. "Who knows? My scientists say it depends on the relative positions of Triton and Mars. The best time will be in five or six days, but you may have to go sooner. Tharol Sen can show you around, and when the time is right, she will take you to the transmitter. It is securely hidden where the police will not find it. In the meantime—"

"I'm a prisoner?"

Sen Bas giggled. "Not exactly. Say, my guest. Your only jailers are outside. Let us hope they will stay there until you can go to Roper ... as he requested."

"Roper must have been in a hurry to get away," grated Torry.

"He was. For excellent reasons. A Solar Survey ship is due off Triton at any time. Roper wanted to be in sole possession of the satellite, with samples to make good his claims to minerals."

Suddenly, everything happened at once. Shrill alarms blared from a dozen quarters. Red lights flared ominously. A fusillade of shots broke out.

Sen Bas swore luridly in Martian. "The police!"

Heavy explosions thundered overhead. The ceiling cracked, opened wide. An avalanche of steel and stone and breaking glass roared into the subcellar gardens. Dust clouds blinded Torry.

IV

FROM the collapsing roof tons of debris poured into the underground gardens and spread over the floor like advancing mountains. Dust choked, Torry staggered blindly before it in panic to avoid being caught and buried. It was like a swift, deadly race with an engulfing landslide.

Free of the confusion and deafening tumult, he turned to look about for Sen Bas and the girl. In the dust cloud it was impossible to see anything. Masses of masonry and fused glass from the collapsing cavern roof continued to detach themselves and crash down in random uproar. Cautiously, Torry picked his way over the mounds of rubble, searching.

A feeble cry led him to Sen Bas. The aged Martian looked like a tattered bundle of red rags. Half buried under a hillock of shattered stone and twisted steel, the old man showed little sign of life, save for still-glittering eyes and husks of sound emerging from bloodless lips. Spreading stains of red seeped from beneath the prisoning blocks.

"If I can lift the stones, can you drag yourself out?" asked Torry.

"Don't—think—so!" gasped Sen Bas.

"Where can I find help?"

"Don't try. Go—quickly. Save yourself. The alarms—police—maybe union killers. Go—"

4—PLANET—Spring

"Not yet," snapped Torry. "We'll worry about the rest after I get you out."

The old man protested. "I'm—old. Does not matter. Get to—transmitter. My people must have—"

Ignoring him, Torry worked. Feverishly he searched for and found a length of reinforcing steel. With it, he dug into debris of glass and stone and tortured steel. Mass by mass, he levered it up and rolled it aside. Fingers raw, steel bending in his hands, he strained to uncover the writhing, bleeding form of Sen Bas. At last he wedged up the last mass and reached under to drag out the ancient Martian. Sen Bas screamed as he came free, but the agony left his face.

"You're hurting him," raged Tharol Sen. She stumbled toward them, her face a mask of hate.

"No!" cried Sen Bas. Gathering breath, he whispered, "He saved me." Then pallor flooded his pinched features.

Torry knelt beside him, not even looking at the girl. "Shut up!" he ordered. "Get bandages—painkilling drugs. He's badly crushed, bleeding to death. Don't argue. Hurry!"

Sen Bas blinked. "Do as he says. . . ." Tharol Sen disappeared.

Alone, Sen Bas stared curiously at his rescuer. "I should have ordered you both to the transmitter. My men could care for me . . . if it matters."

"Not soon enough. Roper can wait."

Sen Bas shook his head. "Roper might. My people cannot. We need heavier metals to power our underground cities. We are a dying race."

"You're a dying man. Don't talk."

The old Martian composed his features with great dignity. "What better time? Our need is desperate. We must claim the transuranics on Triton. Even though they must be freighted here, since they cannot be brought through the transmitter. We tried it, and failed. You know Roper. Will he deal fairly with us?"

Torry shook his head sadly. "No."

Sen Bas did not seem surprised. "I feared that. Will you?"

"I'll try, though I'll have to do what seems best when I get to it."

Sen Bas relaxed. "That is good enough. Did you come to Mars to kill him?"

A shiver wrenched Torry, his eyes glazed. "I haven't decided yet."

"Perhaps it would be best. But he will not be easy to kill. Tharol Sen will take you to him. Perhaps by the time fate has to choose between you and Roper, her blindness will be gone, and she can make a clear choice of her own. . . ."

"How did you—"

With a convulsive grimace, Sen Bas was dead. Moments later, when Tharol Sen appeared loaded with medical supplies, Torry glared at her. Her face a chalk mask, she whimpered.

"Forget it," Torry said angrily. "It's too late for tears."

"Why did you try to save him?"

"If you have to ask, you'd never understand."

Tharol Sen shuddered. "I don't understand anything about you. Who you are. Why you hate us so—"

"Who says I do?"

"Roper. He says—"

"Never mind what he says. I suppose there's no use trying to convince you that he never tells the truth if a lie will serve as well. He's a known criminal, a thief and swindler, and even a murderer. A man who abandoned his wife on Earth, and a small child he's never seen. Frankly, I don't understand you, and I'm not sure I'd want to. You're quite determined to marry him?"

"Quite." Tharol Sen stiffened.

"Well, that's your hard luck. He's no good. No good for you, or anyone. Not even for himself."

"Nothing you can say matters. He told me about that wife. She's too sane, too normal and practical for him. He thinks that I—"

Torry was not listening. Contrasting Tharol Sen with Rose, he was almost inclined to agree with Roper, and envy him such a loyal and spirited defender. The girl was pure-blood Martian, with all the eerie beauty of the strange race. She was young but vibrantly alive and human. There was emotional depth in her, and a passionate savagery that might inspire a man to passion, or to devotion, depending upon the man.

"Besides," finished Tharol Sen, "there is no other man like him."

"Not quite like him, fortunately." Torry laughed bitterly. "I'm a lot like him, if you haven't noticed. But nicer . . . and sometimes smarter."

"That's a matter of opinion," she said acidly. "Yours and mine. But you do resemble him. You're . . . you're not—"

"I'm afraid I am. I'm ashamed to admit it, but Bart Roper and I had the same mother. He's my half-brother."

HER face was puzzled. "Then why—" Torry tightened visibly. "I don't know. Or maybe I just don't want to face it yet. We hate each other as only brothers can. You'd better know that before you take me to him. I may have to kill him."

Tharol Sen sneered. "I don't think you can kill him. I'll take you to him because both Roper and my grandfather wanted me to. Roper can deal with you as he sees fit. But if I think you're a danger to him, I'll kill you. Understand that."

Torry shrugged. "On that basis I'll accept your help. Now you'd better find that transmitter. I suspect that the explosions were the police or the goon squads breaking in."

"They were," she said nastily. "They ran into booby traps in the upper levels. It will take them a while."

"I wouldn't count on too much time," warned Roper. "Grannar is a smart policeman, and the goon squads seemed to know their work."

"This way."

Tharol Sen was coldly aloof, and seemed both preoccupied and depressed, which was natural. She went ahead, wordlessly, and Torry followed, lost in his own reflections. At the far end of Sen Bas' wrecked garden was a steel-arched doorway, high, sombre and gothic. Beyond, and below, lay the sprawling vastness of vaults and caverns which was the Martian underworld. Long, curving ramps led downward into a complex of subsurface workings far below New Chicago.

They descended and slipped quietly across large, echoing platforms whose dimensions were lost in gloom. Metal-shod stairways spiraled upward and downward into invisible infinities. Deep shafts vibrated with strange sounds the ear could not catch or identify. Freight tunnels were yawning

maws of darkness, like the staring, sightless eyes of some mythical monster created on too large a scale for man to understand.

Torry grew tense and nervous. He began to sense patterns of shivering, every movement about him. Walls and ceilings closed in suddenly, and he could make out vague, monstrous forms set into niches within walls carved of bedrock. Old-Martian gods in sculpture—leering stone spectres, goblin-like, and subtly obscene.

Tharol Sen paused. Her hand sought Torry's and drew him close, but not in friendliness. She whispered harshly, warning him to silence and extreme caution.

"I was wrong. The police have broken through. Some are already in the vaults."

She followed a maze of barely visible threadlike guidelines of luminosity set into the metallic tiling. A few steps more brought them to a wide platform, from which many tunnel mouths opened. Along one wall ranged banks of elevators. Beyond were ranks of empty pneumatic tube cars on tracks which angled in sharp descent into wells a level below the platform. Spidery Martian hieroglyphs labeled various shafts and the tube terminals. Tharol Sen studied the markings closely before making her choice.

"I have been here only once before," she complained. "It is not easy to find the way. But I think the police will have more trouble."

She selected a pneumatic tube car. Torry boosted her to the door flap. She settled herself in the tiny seat cradle, then from inside, extended him a helping hand. For the first time she noticed his blistered palms and raw fingers. He grunted painfully as she drew him up beside her.

"I should have bandaged your hands," she mused.

Torry snorted. "Can you drive this shuttle? It has more gadgets than a space ship."

"One way to find out," murmured Tharol Sen icily, poking a slim finger at a keyboard of colored studs. Distant machinery whirled and whined. Flaps banged shut and the shuttle car shot forward and down at sickening speed. Tharol Sen laughed, and the sound was of ice chips trickling on metal foil.

Air whipped angrily about the shell of

thin metal. There was no gut wrenching nausea of acceleration, only sharp awareness of speed. Movement became a blur streaming past the transparent plastic cartop. It was like being part of a hollow missile fired from an air gun. As the car's original impetus diminished, speed dwindled. The car dipped and slowed, then ran into a stop valve, like a piston in a closed cylinder, and stopped on a dense cushion of compressed air.

Another vista of platforms radiated away from the terminal.

Gripping Torry's hand, Tharol Sen dragged him firmly along the platform, then down a steep slant to the lowest levels. At intervals, radilumes provided glaring light, but shadows of raw fantasy lingered curiously near the walls. Tomblike oppression gathered around them. Panic grows quickly underground; weight of rock pressing overhead translates itself to the brain in terms of claustrophobia.

METALLIC decking became raw stone floor, and an endless tunnel unwound before them. Torry lost all track of direction, even the primary up and down. They went through underground workings like city streets lined with open front factories. Gray, barren vistas of workrooms were relieved by the stark symmetries of sleek machines, shielded atomic converters, and patiently revolving turbines. Here was the marvelously efficient underground economy of the old Martian civilization, still functioning and serving the remnants of a great race of builders and scientists.

On soaring cantilevered balconies and in alcoves, Torry glimpsed cliff like structures of offices and dwellings. Giant compressors labored to force a mighty pulse of breakable air—but the atmosphere was warm, dry and stifling. Runnels of sweat ran down Torry's body and vanished in quick evaporation; fever and exertion alternated in him; he blew hot and cold as energy burned away too quickly, and as drying sweat produced intense, quick chills. Temperatures dropped. Air seemed denser and was poisonously clouded with dust, but it was cool. Slowly it became chill and depressing with a hint of dampness in it. They came into a maze of galleries and pits, tunnels and vaults, less

used and uninhabited portions of the deep-workings.

It was like a world apart, a place of dim storage bins with natural refrigeration, of packing sheds piled high with mountains of commercial molds, bales of dry, compressed and packed mushrooms. It smelled stale and foul, the air hideous with a powdery mist of mold dust and spores, and the incredible mustiness of mushroom spoilage. These caverns were empty of life, as if the troglodyte Martians had long ago joined their mummied dead.

Weakness suddenly caught up with Torry. Dizzy, he caught in panic at Tharol Sen for support. Grudgingly, after a moment's hesitation, she granted the help.

"I'm sorry," Torry apologized. "It's been a rather active three days. I guess Ferax and his boys hurt me more than I had thought."

"They are good at hurting people," admitted the girl. "You still want to go on in this condition?"

"Don't mind me. Just give me a minute." Torry was painfully aware of her strong, slender body beneath the filmy garments of spidersilk. To change the subject, he said, "Don't tell me you're planning to venture out to Pluto or Triton in that costume?"

Tharol Sen made a face. "Hardly. There are spacesuits ready. We'll need them, don't worry. Roper says Triton is hardly livable at all, even protected. You'll find out if you've the nerve to go through with me."

"So Planet X is not even a planet, just one of Neptune's moons?"

"Perhaps it was a planet once. Both Pluto and Triton are not like the rest of the solar system planets. They may have been two stray worlds from outer space, captured long ago by our sun. For their size they have mass out of all proportion. The quantities of heavy metals beyond uranium give them extreme weight and density. Pluto has a density of over fifty times that of water. Triton not so much, but still greater by far than Earth's density, which is roughly five or six times that of water. Though smaller than Mercury or Ganymede, Triton has a gravity only slightly less than Earth's and a far denser atmosphere blanket."

Torry laughed grimly. "That's a big speech for you."

"Too long a speech," she agreed irritably.

"Especially with the police close behind us."

Torry sighed. "Okay. We'll go on. This is a lot of trouble over one slimy mirage salesman."

"Mirage salesman? Why do you call him that?"

"Simple enough. That's all he's ever peddled. Pot of gold at the end of the rainbow to tempt the greedy and unwary. And rainbows are circular, with no beginning and no end. Haven't you ever heard the term?"

"I have now. I wondered, that's all. There are mirages on Triton. He'll have plenty to sell."

Torry snorted. "I can see you've bought one."

Flasher signals on the wall began to blink rapidly.

They moved steadily onward, faster than before, into a still more shadowy region. Light itself seemed to exist only at long intervals where age-old radilumes performed a feeble service. The spongy floor of rotten bedrock was scummed over with moss to make for slippery footing. Formations of natural rock seemed like stage furniture designed by elves and gnomes, in which stone mimicked monstrosities of the vegetable world. Fat, knotted stalagmites suggested tree trunks, and the darkness overhead appeared like shadowy densities of foliage. Seepage had fretted the walls into lacy limestone traceries like a fern forest. They went on, with tense silence savage between them.

Alarm blinkers flashed light codes of rapid pursuit.

"Your people must have had much contact with the police to have worked out such a set-up," observed Torry.

Tharol Sen nodded. "We have been persecuted for centuries. Not many Earthfolk have ever been here. Nor any others but my own people."

"Yet the police seem to be finding their way."

Tharol Sen frowned. "That puzzles me," she admitted. "How could they come here at all unless someone has betrayed us?"

From close behind sounded the loud buzzing of a radiation detector. A thin pencil beam flashed at them and splashed wetly over the cavern wall ahead. Rock shattered

in a brittle, crunchy explosion. Murderous chips deluged the tunnel.

Torry lunged at the girl, dragging her down in a savage fall. More beams of light licked out, this time from several directions. Continuous thunders roared and reverberated, stunning ears and brains with concussion and sound. Roughly, Torry thrust the girl into a wall niche for shelter.

"The police!" wailed Tharol Sen.

"Looks as if we're trapped. We'd better give ourselves up."

She stared at him with contempt. "You still have your gun. If you're afraid, give it to me."

"One gun against a dozen. No thanks."

Waiting a lull in the blast uproar, Torry called out. His voice rang hollowly in the cavern, still shuddering with echoes of the explosions.

"Hold your fire. We're coming out."

Grannar's voice answered. "Throw out your gun first."

Torry complied. His gun rattled on the floor of rock.

Pushing Tharol Sen sullenly before him, Torry stood clear. In a moment, the tunnel was full of uniformed figures.

Grannar studied Torry with some amusement. "You needn't have gone so fast. I got your note, but your trail ran into a dead end at Ferax's office. It took time to pick it up again but we found it beside Sen Bas' body in his gardens. Clever deal, Torry. Using radioactive dust on your shoes like that. Shall we handcuff Tharol Sen and take her back?"

"No," answered Torry glumly. "She's going to show us the way to Roper."

"So you betrayed us?" asked Tharol Sen, contempt making her face ugly.

"That's a matter of opinion."

Grannar broke in. "Better pick up your gun, Torry. You may need it. How many men shall we take?"

Torry shrugged. "That depends on the number of spacesuits available. How many, Tharol Sen?"

"Three," she replied bitterly. "Do you think two of you dare tackle Roper alone?"

"I think so. How about it, Grannar?"

The policeman grunted.

The matter transmitter was already set up. Upon its folding framework the screen

glittered like woven quicksilver, vibrating to the hum of electro magnetic flow.

"Will this take us directly to Roper?" asked Grannar.

"Not quite," said Torry, grinning. "It's a delicate adjustment. Mars and Neptune both in motion, and Triton's orbit and axial rotation to consider. We'll be somewhere on Triton—"

"But Triton has more land surface than Earth. Can we find—"

Torry gestured. "She'll find him for us. Have your men stand by and switch on the transmitter every three hours."

Dressed for space, the three entered the screen.

V

PLANET X—or Neptune's moon, Triton—was a vast mirage with many facets. Atmosphere was as dense and still as water in ocean deeps. Sky was cloudless, but not clear, apparently built up of different layers of gases, and the light was both glaring and erratic. At a distance of over three and a half billion miles from the Sun, most of the light was not sunlight, and the little that came through the air ocean was filtered and absorbed into curious colors and intensities. Other illumination sources were auroral displays, radioactive hotspots that glowed like eery ghosts, and volcanic outbursts of crimson or gold.

Surface pressure of the atmospheric ocean was extreme, and the gas densities and weird light gave an uncanny submarine illusion. Venturing onto the surface of Triton, Torry felt like a diver in that long-past period when man's last frontier on Earth had seemed the ocean deeps. Gravity, greater than on Mars, but less than Earth's, gave a sense of buoyancy; the spacesuiting was not unlike ancient diving costume; and the thickness of the atmosphere itself suggested deep, still water.

Most disturbing of all were the mirages. All the familiar effects of Earth mirages were present but magnified and even multiplied into infinite complexities. To a scientist of optics or meteorology, Triton would be a superb laboratory. To Torry, it was—

Near madness. . . !

Mirages by hundreds and thousands floated between surface and zenith, or hugged the ground like captive nightmares. Pinnacled dream mountains rose from bases of empty air. Phantom battlements and mock castles stormed upward from nothing. Magnified rockeries became goblin cities, looming near or far in equal scale. Water glittered in the sky and on the ground, and floating debris became fleets of fairy argosies. Lateral mirages played eery jokes with distance. All images seemed unreal, and diffraction haloed them with misty, rainbow coloring.

Triton itself was bleak, savage, merciless, nearly windless but for vagrant currents of slow-moving dense air, like currents in an ocean.

By levels, temperatures were absurdly high or low, depending upon location or freak circumstances. It was a lifeless world, inhospitable to man. But it wore a mask and costume of exotic, lying beauty, and masquerade was hard to distinguish from the harsh reality. Anything definite was hard to distinguish.

Grannar turned up the microphone in his helmet, and his words rattled from Torry's speaker.

"How can we find Roper in such a madhouse as this?" he roared.

Torry winced as the amplified outburst thundered in his ears.

"Simple enough," he replied. "Fine detective you are. There's a radio compass built into Tharol Sen's suit. Roper's sending all the time. She'll go to him like a homing pigeon."

"Pigeon is right," muttered Grannar. "Hope it's not too far. A little more of this would make me neurotic. Can we trust her?"

Torry laughed. "Yes and no. She hates us, but she'll lead us to Roper. That transmitter is his only way back to Mars. And hers, too. Isn't that right, Tharol Sen?"

Fortunately her reply did not come through clearly.

Following the radio compass, which behaved erratically due to magnetic discharges, they moved through the wilderness of the mirages. Progress was deceptive, without reliable landmarks. Rugged terrain made treacherous going. Megalithic cities and monstrous mountains appeared and disap-

peared like patterns in a kaleidoscope. In the eccentric lighting, vision itself seemed to flicker as treacherously as a three-d projector running out of balance. Constant distortions and fading out produced mental nausea and physical insecurity.

Torry was not sure where his next step would take him. One instant he seemed to flounder on the edge of abyss. The next, he would be climbing what seemed an interminable mountain, only to have solid floors of rock shimmer and vanish before his eyes. It was impossible to see where they were going, or even be certain what it was like where they had just been. Only the needle of the radio compass held any steadiness at all, and that jerked into wild whirlings now and then as magnetic currents ebbed and flowed in the ground.

They seemed, through rifts in the mirages, to be traversing a monstrous field of jagged boulders, inclined slightly upward. Even these rocks were not always as substantial as they looked, but for the most part, they were real obstacles. The thought crossed Torry's mind that it would be a bad place for an ambush if Roper were so inclined.

When the facts materialized his fears, the pencil beam of a blaster cutting through the mirages seemed only part of a dazzling auroral display.

THE explosion that followed demonstrated its reality. Rock chips and larger fragments rained about them. In the dense medium of atmosphere, the shock wave was terrific, and even his spacesuit did not completely insulate the blow. All three were flung about as if by earthquake. Torry missed his footing and went down in a long sprawl, which saved his life.

The second blaster flash would have targeted him dead center. It flickered harmless over him, touched the nearby boulders to sudden glare, then lost itself in fearful detonation. Dodging the hail of debris, Torry crawled quickly to shelter behind a larger boulder. With gauntleted hands, he tested its solidity before he trusted himself to relax.

A harsh cry of pain and terror echoed in his ears. Its tones held desperation. And the voice was Grannar's.

By concentrating Torry could dimly make

out the figure of the detective. Grannar lay in tumbled heap, threshing wildly and trying to hold shut great rents in his space suit. He seemed to be injured, for one leg was motionless while the rest of his body worked in convulsions.

Torry left his shelter and bounded toward the casualty. He bundled Grannar roughly, to his feet and hustled him into the nearest tangle of solid rocks. A hastily aimed blaster beam hurried him at the task. Crouching down, he examined Grannar. The policeman was conscious, swearing valiantly. His leg was broken. Inside the space suit it would be impossible to set the fracture. And outside, the toxic gases of Triton would make short work of human breathing. Even the rents in the suiting were dangerous.

Working quickly, Torry clipped together the rents and sealed them hermetically with compound from the repair kits.

"That's the best I can do," he told the policeman grimly as his eyes searched in vain for a sign of Roper. "You'll have to stand the rest till we can get out of here and back to Mars."

"What are our chances of getting out?"

A man does not shrug in a spacesuit. "Not good," said Torry. "Roper can keep us pinned here as long as he likes."

"How long d'you think that'll be?"

Torry grunted. "Till he gets tired of it and decides to stalk us and kill us. Or till I go out and get him."

"I see. It's like that, eh? Where's the girl?"

"Who knows? She's either hiding out in the rocks, like us, or she's found a way to join Roper. Does it matter?"

"Not to me," mused Grannar. "I just hoped maybe she wasn't as rotten as Roper . . . that she might give us a chance."

"Don't count on it," said Torry spitefully. "She might be as pure as an angel, but Roper's sold her a bill of goods. Feeling as she does about him, she'd kill either of us as quickly as Roper would."

They waited in silence, while mirages came and went around them, as light shifted, or slight currents stirred in the turbid air. If Roper were a mirage salesman, he had certainly made his stand in the wholesale house. Under other circumstances, Torry might have found the displays inter-

esting, even entertaining—but at the moment, his reflections were as poisonous as the air on Triton.

Colors flared and faded like a cross-spectrum of inferno.

Grannar was restless with the pain in his leg. His squirming infected Torry, who leaned out above the barrier of rocks waving his hand violently. As he hoped, he attracted attention. A thin wire of light kissed the rocks of the barrier. Chips pelted like hail, and the force of the blast set up thunderous echoes in his helmet.

"He must have rigged a scanner of some sort. Such shooting is too good for a man with mirages in his eyes. Would something like infra-red help?"

"I don't know," growled Grannar. "In any case, we haven't the time or the means to work out a scanner."

"I think I'll try crawling out of here. If I keep low, I might be able to work around and come up behind him. Is it all right with you if I give it a try?"

"Why not? Outside of your life, what have you got to lose?"

"I hate to leave you here unless you want it that way. But there's not much future for you, anyhow, if I stay."

"Do whatever you like. I guess I owe you something, and I like to pay my debts. Any other last wishes?"

"Just one. I want him. . . ."

"Roper? You want to kill him?" Grannar sounded baffled.

"Kill or cure."

"I don't understand."

"You want him on Mars for murder. He's wanted on Earth for lesser crimes. That gives you priority. You can demand and get extradition for him to Mars, which means quick death in the atomic disintegrators, or slow death in the prison mines. On Earth, they have a clinic for incurables like Roper. It's a free choice for them, euthanasia or voluntary submission to the clinic."

Grannar hesitated. "I know about that. But isn't such a treatment almost as dangerous as being killed outright, and a lot tougher on the subject?"

"It can be," granted Torry flatly. "Sometimes the hypnotic memory-blanking or the shock treatment wrecks the brain. And the

glandular surgery and hormone dosage can turn a man into a freak and monster. If it works, the criminal is rebuilt mentally and morally, re-created with a new personality, and completely new educational background. He's hardly the same man, and often his old friends can't recognize him physically."

Grannar's eyes narrowed. "In Roper's case, that might be an advantage. Of course I'm familiar with the clinic and its work in rehabilitating incorrigibles. But do you think any treatment could work the miracle with Roper?"

"I don't know and don't care. People like Roper help make life colorful and interesting. But they're too hard on everyone around them. His adolescent-stasis carries his own damnation for him. He's miserably unhappy, along with everyone who knows him. He imagines he's smarter and superior to other people, and that it's his duty to prey on them. Mentally, he's a rotten-spoiled child. But a dangerous one. Like the one rotten apple, he spreads his rottenness through the whole barrel."

"I'm familiar with that theory of crime but I don't go along with it. I'm not convinced you can unspoil a rotten apple, and I doubt if it's worth while to try."

"No matter," said Torry grimly. "If they fail on him, they'll destroy him. Either way, it will make a better world for everyone. Probably I hate him more than you do. But I'm willing to give him this last chance if you'll let me."

Grannar laughed ironically. "Have it your way, if you can take him. It's out of my hands, actually. Though, as a cop, I'd be better satisfied if you burned him down here, I'll settle for your clinic. It's a nasty enough choice, anyhow. If you can capture or kill him, go ahead. I'll gladly resign my share of the brute to you. And you'll earn it. Do you really think you can crawl out of here and circle him?"

Torry glanced sourly at the flickering mirages. "I can try," he said slowly.

IT WAS a mirage that saved Torry.

Going proved even rougher than he had expected. Squirming over unknown terrain is hard, even in conditions of fair visibility. On Triton, with its constantly varying light, and the ever-present confusion of mirages,

it was fantastic. The cumbersome space suit was no help.

Darkness thickened around him, but the mirages grew worse, as he toiled up the slope. Loose stones rattled about him in tiny avalanches, and he went more carefully, lest they betray him to Roper. Sweat bathed him inside his insulated costume, and steam misted the helmet's face plate before he could get the thermal conditioners functioning properly. A bad foothold earned him a nasty fall, and the rough suiting and acid sweat combined to burn painful blisters on hands and knees.

In grim determination approximating madness, he plunged upward and onward. He found an eroded ravine and groped blindly along it, wondering what fearful liquids had gashed such a gully on such a nightmarish world.

Alien dusk gathered, and in the hollow of the ravine writhed coils of living light. At intervals, he avoided the hot glaring flares of radioactive hotspots. Torry followed the barren fissure, and strange sounds and fleeting light-phantoms followed him. And a river of dense, sluggish air funneled upward through the gully, whispering of ugly, forgotten events upon a forgotten world. In the uneasy sky overhead, electrical discharges wove networks of colored lightnings, which crackled and hissed as static in his earphones.

Nearing the upper end of the gully, Torry halted and took stock of his surroundings. He estimated progress, and wondered how he would ever find his quarry. His quest seemed one more mad illusion in the sequence of mirages. He freed his blaster from its magnetic belt clip and examined it for charge. Crawling with the weapon in his hand was awkward, but it would be suicide to be caught reaching for it. Grimly he worked his way to the notch of the ravine and poked out his head.

Ironically, it was the mirage that saved him.

A lateral mirage, distorting both distance and direction, showed him a sharp image, inverted, of Roper aiming carefully in the opposite direction.

Instantly, Torry let go his grasp and dropped. He fell and rolled savagely, while the lance of light stabbed overhead, and the ex-

plosion started small landslides around him. He screamed in momentary panic. Preventing a helpless plunge into an abyss which opened before him was a chore. And the abyss itself proved only illusion. Solid wall blocked his fall and stunned him for a terrible moment. Miraculously, he retained a grip on his gun.

He lay quietly, while rocks continued to rattle upon his helmet and spacesuit. Someone was descending toward him. It could be only—

Roper.

The visible face behind the plate of transparent plastic could have been poured in the same mold as Torry's. It was younger, finer-featured, but it was shrewd, self-indulgent. Roper had enjoyed his life of crime, and it had agreed with him. He looked healthy, humorously handsome and extremely well-fed.

He stared at Torry, and the expression on his face changed as he saw the blaster. He started a movement toward his own clipped weapon.

"Don't try it, Bart," ordered Torry sharply. "I think I'd enjoy killing you."

Bart Roper sighed deeply. "You took unfair advantage of me," he complained. "I thought you were hurt or killed. I was coming to see—"

"To make sure of me, if you'd missed? Maybe not. Maybe you did have a human impulse for once. I'll try to think so. And you can see how much it hurts when someone takes advantage of any human weakness. It hurts, doesn't it?"

Roper nodded slowly. "It does. So you've got me! Don't be so proud of yourself. It wasn't that hard. I was cooked from the moment your police pals got their hands on the transmitter. It was my only way out. You know that, of course. I just wanted the pleasure of taking some of you with me. I'm not going back to Mars. The disintegrators, or life in the prison mines don't appeal to me. So you'd better kill me now."

"I will if you force me," Torry told him wearily. "But I'm not making it that easy for you. There's a choice, but you won't like it. I've made a deal with Grannar. You can die now, or you can go back to Earth to the clinic."

"The clinic!" shrieked Roper. "You know

what that means. I wouldn't be the same person. Maybe not even human."

Torry steadied his eyes on his brother. "I'm not sure you ever were human. But you need treatment. They'll knock out your thymus, drug you and shock you and carve you till you'll never know yourself. You won't be an antisocial monster with the emotional stasis of a child. You won't be anything you've ever been. But you may be a man. And you'll stop hurting people, or they'll stop you for good. The choice is yours—right now. So make up both our minds before I decide to shoot."

Roper yielded with a grimace of distaste. "You win, Torry. You always did, sooner or later. I was quicker, but you were smarter. I guess Rose was the last of your toys I'll ever swipe. And it's back to kindergarten for Bart Roper."

Torry relaxed, though he still did not lower his gun.

"You'll be going back on the survey ship, Bart. That way, you'll have a long voyage in the brig to meditate on your sins. But on Earth, you'll have Rose. You're a married man there, with a wife and child. Rose still loves you, Bart. When you steal something, it stays stolen. I'm not going back, so you'll get Rose after all."

Roper laughed coldly. "That's what I meant about your being smarter than I am. You always come out ahead."

Torry's eyes followed a moving mirage to a notch high on the walls of the gully. The glitter of cold metal was not illusion. Tharol Sen held a gun on him, unwaveringly.

"You can come out now," Torry said to her. "It's all over."

Tharol Sen lowered her gun and walked unsteadily toward them.

"Why didn't you shoot?" Roper stormed at her angrily. "You could have killed him before he pulled the trigger."

Inside her face plate, Torry could see her eyes dim with hot tears.

"Yes, I could have," she said brokenly. "But maybe I've seen enough mirages to recognize one. . . ."

MANY Martian hours later, three people watched the survey ship blast off from Triton. Before the ship left, Grannar had

been taken aboard and removed from his spacesuit long enough for drugs to be administered and his legs set and splinted. Now, with painkilling narcotics deadening him, the policeman was scarcely aware of the departing ship with his prisoner aboard, consigned bodily to Earth and its clinic for incurable criminals. Grannar had relaxed into a dope-daydream of a comfortable future on Earth as a plankton farmer, with nothing to do but read minifilm detective stories.

Watching the ship vanish beyond a skyful of mirages, Torry tried vainly to conquer a feeling of depression. Loneliness swept over him, as if with the sudden termination of his obsession about Roper, his life had lost most of its meaning. It occurred to him suddenly that Tharol Sen must be feeling infinitely worse. With a quick glance toward Grannar to make sure that the policeman was all right, Torry climbed slowly to the cyrie in the high rocks where the girl had hidden herself. Like a doll in a space suit, Tharol Sen huddled together, staring upward as if toward some vanishing illusion.

Shared loneliness sometimes loses its sting.

But Tharol Sen ignored Torry's presence, and he felt acutely embarrassed.

"You'll be better off without him," Torry said, consoling her. "And life will be much simpler."

"I know that," she replied sharply. "What else did you want?"

Torry laughed.

"Business, I guess. According to Solar Spacelaw, we three are sole owners of Triton and its mineral rights, since we were on the spot and in possession when the survey ship

arrived. Your people will have the transuranics they need. But the stuff won't work in the transmitter, so it'll have to go in the hard way. High freight charges will cut down the profits, so I don't think any of us will get rich. I'm sure that Grannar will sell his rights cheap. And as far as I'm concerned, I'd rather your people had the stuff at cost, so I'll sign over my rights to them for the forty-one thousand credits I've invested. Also, you can claim salvage rights on the transmitter of a third of the value, and I'm sure the inventor will be happy to have it back at that. I won't ask any part of the salvage claim. Money just weighs me down anyhow."

"That's very generous of you," murmured Tharol Sen. "My people will be very grateful to you."

"And you," he asked. "Just how grateful will you be?"

Her eyes blinked, then stared soberly through the face plate of her helmet. "Ask that again—"

"It's not part of the deal, of course. But you bragged that you could make Roper forget a girl back on Earth. I need some full time forgetting, and I wondered if you'd like to try the same stunt for me."

Tharol Sen studied him for a long moment before answering.

"When we're out of these helmets," she said softly, "you can kiss me. Just once. For gratitude. Afterward, much later, we can think about the rest, and discuss it with dignity. If you're staying on Mars, why not look me up . . . sometime?"

"Why not?" asked Torry, grinning. Then without waiting for the kiss, he made his decision. "And I'm staying on Mars. . . ."

in this moment

The prayer lingers still . . . across the table as Dad begins to serve . . . it brushes Mother's still-bowed head . . . it caresses Sally's fist as she reaches for the promised drumstick. The words of thanksgiving are being made real in this moment—gratitude from a good provider to the Great Provider . . . in this time of security together.

The most precious gift we give or receive is the gift of security. Only in a land like ours are we free to choose security as a goal of living.

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THE SPACE BETWEEN

By ROBERT ERNEST GILBERT

*Somewhat like Nathan Hale of old, Jak SP regretted having
but one vitality to give for his Planet . . .
and the starry-eyed Drusilla.*

ONE hour and forty-one minutes before deceleration, the spacecopter materialized off to right, matching precisely the 3360 kilometers per second speed of the Box. Jak SP34509260 jerked erect in answer to blinking red lights and screeching collision whistles. The dark glass and liquid ozone of the control cabin windows gave but a distorted view of space, although enough to show the sleek shape outside.

Drusilla GW414249834, asymmetric in a flowing, floreated, red robe, clamped slender hands over her ears and squawled, "What now, Jak? You know I have a headache! Can't you be considerate?"

Jak pressed a switch, to stop the whistles, and hoped she would not faint again. His wide mouth drooping with concern, he said, "It's O. K., sweetjet. That spacecopter did it. See?"

He activated all viewers.

With rotorwings and fins retracted, the spacecopter resembled a thick, but sharply pointed, needle. Jak increased the magnification of Number 3 viewer until he could read the license, SE—YNWGR. "From Enceladus!" he said. "Saturn's second moon. If I'd known she had a station, we could have looked there for a doc. Did you take that tomato juice off my uniform?"

Drusilla's gray eyes squinted. She stood with such rigidity that her feet floated clear of the deck. She said, "I informed you I'll accept no substitute for the Wollongong Obstetric Hospital on Earth, and I didn't clean your uniform. That cleanser makes me vomit."

"Sorry, sweetjet," Jak mumbled. He wished he could say something just once without upsetting her. He magnetized his shoes and pulled Drusilla down from the

ceiling. "I was thinking of you," he pleaded, "but don't you worry. We'll be on Luna in a bit over four earth-days. From there to—"

Drusilla pulled loose and flitted to Number 3 viewer. "Why couldn't you have a plane like that?" she demanded with a dramatic gesture at the needle shape. "The Box!" That's what this wreck looks like, a prehistoric boxcar!"

"But, sweetjet, I've told you. Streamlining is useless except in atmosphere. The Box is the most economical construction for—"

"What's that insignia?" Drusilla interrupted. "Like a skull and two bones. What is it?"

Jak turned the knob to maximum magnification. "Umm. I believe that's an old pictograph for poison. Perhaps they're carrying some poisonous cargo, and—"

"In a yatch?" Drusilla sneered. "Why can't you have a yatch?"

"My salary. I hoped to pick up enough ore in the Rings, this trip, but we had to bring you back, and—"

"You act as if it were my fault!" Drusilla squeaked.

The plates of the Box vibrated slightly as the spacecopter threw out magnetic grapples and reeled in until the fuselages touched. The airlock of the slender plane opened to release three spacesuited figures. "Men!" Drusilla gasped. Her hands flew in instinctive twitches to red tattooed lips, blue tattooed eyelids, and green dyed hair.

Jak's pointed chin seemed to grow longer. He sighed. He shook his head and muttered, "Probably want to borrow a welding rod. I remember once in the Albert Group, a miner boarded me looking almost devi-



talized, and all he wanted was a can opener to—"

"Spare me the anecdotes," said Drusilla, surveying her surgically tilted nose in a small mirror. "That's all I've heard for three months."

JAK'S shoulders heaved in a greater sigh. He hoped for no more trips like this one. During endless earth-days he had cruised the Cassini Division of the Rings of Saturn, picking up a little yttrium, antimony and platinum, with Drusilla sunk in depths of boredom and rarely leaving the plane. The arrival of the viewnote informing her that her Self Portrait had won first prize in the Interearth Photographic Salon had elated her for several days; but then she had announced, one earth-morning, the development of an acute case of pregnancy. Since the much published history of Lar BW16177 on Hungaria throbbled vivid in his mind, Jak could do nothing except set a course for Luna, carrying half empty ore bins and four months of unexpired leave.

A bulb on the instrument panel blinked to signal the opening of the outer airlock door. Jak said, "If I can't greet them in uniform, I'll have to go like this." He adjusted his trunks and stood by the airlock, which placed him head down in relation to Drusilla posing by the strangely silent radio.

Lar BW16177, stranded on the asteroid, had been devitalized horribly when, under low gravity, the fetus had developed with unprecedented rapidity. Jak had set the fastest course he thought safe for Drusilla, 6,240,000,000 kilometers at 1 G acceleration, 208,000,000 kilometers in free fall, and 6,240,000,000 kilometers at 1 G deceleration. He had tried to keep Drusilla occupied with her photographic hobby and its current triumph, although he could not understand why her picture had won first prize. It had no color, being done in blacks, grays, and whites, and showed every detail of her face. It looked about like something Daguerre would have done in 1839. Jak much preferred modern photography with its soft colors, pleasing blurs, and striking abstractions. His own hobby was woodcarving, because so few things were made of wood.

The inner door of the airlock opened. The three men in space-suits walked across the ceiling and down the bulkhead to the deck. Jak saluted the faces almost invisible behind colored glass and made gestures asking the visitors to remove their helmets. One of the men turned and clanked off along the narrow passage. Another unsealed and removed the helmet of the tall man who seemed to be the leader.

Drusilla actually blushed and giggled. Jak, who considered himself above petty embarrassment, felt rather ashamed himself, for the visitor had never had his facial hair removed. It grew profusely in a disgusting fringe between nose and upper lip and formed a horrid black triangle on the point of his chin. Jak rubbed a shaking hand over his own smooth cheeks and shaven head and stammered, "Welcome to the—the Box. How's your hobby? I—I am Jak SP34509260, and this is Drusilla GW414249834. How may we help?"

The man with the hairy lip paid little attention to the traditional greeting, nor did he reply. His black eyes smoldered at Drusilla. In a vibrant voice, he purred, "Drusilla, Latin, meaning 'with dewy eyes.' How appropriate! What a rare and sweet old name! I detest these ugly modern names."

The eyes flashed to Jak. "I presume your name is a horrid modern one?"

Jak, maddened with indignation, snapped, "I told you I'm Jak SP34509260. Who are you, and how may we help? In about an hour and a half—"

"Silence!" shouted the visitor.

This brutal direction shocked Jak into acquiescence. An even greater shock stunned him when the other man who had remained in the cabin removed his helmet. This one, Jak decided, must be mentally deficient, or else he would have had a plastidoc treat the red scar tissue covering the left side of his face. Jak could not understand the semicircle of black cloth over the man's left eye.

The leader bent his torso toward Drusilla as much as the spacesuit allowed, and said, "My true name and serial number, you shall never know, fair lady; but for practical purposes, I have adopted the name of the most famous pirate of the early

Twentieth Century, Earl Flim. You may call me Captain Flim."

The third man came back through the passage. He looked ordinary enough, although he had let his hair grow. He reported, "No one else aboard, captain."

Flim said, "Excellent, Ger. Destroy all communication apparatus."

Ger pulled a wrench from his tool kit and took a preliminary slash at the radio. Completely puzzled, Jak protested, "Wait! What do you mean 'pirate'? Pirate? What—"

"Silence!" Flim roared.

Only then did Jak notice the pistol. Since the successful conclusion of the Crime War, when Organized Crime, the greatest blight that ever sapped a planet, was eradicated, guns could be found only in museums. Even before the War, guns had become a rarity among the law abiding citizenry; since the slaughter of fifteen thousand people a year in hunting and home accidents in the State of America alone had brought about anti-firearm laws and sent the gun the way of the private automobile.

OF COURSE, the small criminal divisions of the Earth Patrol and the Space Patrol still carried pistols, although more as ornaments than weapons. The pistol in the clip holster on Flim's right leg seemed to be the standard Patrol arm—not a "needle gun," or a "disintegrator," or a "heat ray," or any other impractical dream weapon, but a Morgia, 30-shot, 6 mm, semi-automatic pistol with adjustable optical sight. The Morgia alarmed Jak sufficiently to prevent him from interfering as Ger tore into the radio with wrench and pliers.

Drusilla squeaked and drifted aside. "There, there, fair lady," Flim crooned. "No harm shall come to you."

"Watch what you call her!" Jak rasped. "I demand to know what you're doing! There's no time for your hobby. Drusilla needs obstetric attention, and I'm—"

"Silence!" Flim turned to Drusilla. "Ah, fair one, you shall have every attention, obstetric and otherwise. Fear not. Such gorgeous green hair! Those lips! Do I detect the master touch of Per BT1414?"

Drusilla managed to subdue her blushing and said, "Yes. He did my eyelids too. Do you like them?"

"Blue as the skies of Earth!" Flim's gaze dropped. "However, in that robe, I cannot tell—"

"What—" Jak tried to shout in mounting disgust at this performance.

"Stupid!" Drusilla spat. "Can't you see what Captain Flim is? Don't you remember that tridie we saw on Mars about Jean Lafitte? Daun TA1924 was Jean, and he rode his Model T-Ford into New Orleans to help Olehickory Jackson. He was a pirate, and that's what Captain Flim is."

Flim murmured, "True, fair lady. I follow a great tradition! Jean Lafitte, Robert Kidd, Mary Ree, Henry Morgan, and Long John Ag! The old Brotherhood of the Coast shall become the brotherhood of the space between worlds ripe for plunder. Among the cosmic notes—"

"You need a psycodoc," Jak said, proud to create an interruption himself for once. "How can you be a pirate? No one is. The Space Patrol would put you in Corrective School for twenty semesters if you were. That's a worse negative action than falsehood in advertising!"

"I am a pirate," Flim said in defiance of Jak's logic. "The Space Patrol! Avast! The Space Patrol is fit for nothing but rescue and exploration. No pirates? What of the Crime War? The noble cause of Organized Crime put planes into the void. They sent one of the first to Luna in the old days."

Jak could see no other course but to believe the man, whose brain had obviously deteriorated. He said, "Check. You're a pirate. Why? Why is he wrecking my equipment, and why are you armed?"

"Because there is nothing exciting!" Flim declaimed. "The whole Solar System is humble drum. I would have ridden the star-plane to new adventure, but they refused me. On Earth, they made me a microcataloger maintainer. Me! Its sole benefit was to acquaint me with the great piratical traditions of the past by revealing records available only to qualified scholars. No, there is nothing both legitimate and exciting to do any more."

Jak said, "Why don't you find a quick cure for dementia praecox? That hasn't been done."

"I dislike your tone," Flim rasped. "Looge! Silence him!"

The scarred man, who had stood without moving, blinked his visible eye and grunted, "Yer, uh, what?"

"Silence him!"

"Oh. Er, how?"

"Knock him down!" Flim cried. "Beat him! Use your fists!"

Drusilla giggled. "Now we'll see if you're brave as you always tell me, Jak."

JAK gaped at her in amazement. "Drusilla," he wheezed. "Are you turning against me completely? After all—our child! I know you're attracted to this man. All women are attracted by anything vulgar, but—"

Drusilla placed one hand on her hip and fluffed her hair with the other. "All you've ever done for me is give me three boring months in the Rings," she said.

Jak stood with open mouth, and Looze squeezed past Flim. Grasping his right wrist with his left hand, Looze drew back his arm. "No, no," Flim said. "Use one hand at a time!"

Looze mumbled and cocked his right arm. With no gravity, the force of this movement yanked his magnetized boots from the deck and sent him sprawling across the astrogator's couch.

Flim stroked the loathsome triangle of hair on his chin and sighed, "How decadent we are these days! He does not even understand brutality."

"Bring over the rest of your crew," Jak said. "They may."

With nauseous pride, Flim bellowed, "This is my crew! We three against the void! Ger, find a plank!"

Ger turned holding a mess of loosened wiring in his hand and asked, "A what?"

"A plank."

Drusilla said, "I know what you mean. Jak has one in quarters. He does wood-carving. Of all the silly hobbies—"

"Don't be so helpful," Jak told Drusilla. "Leave that plank alone. It's the only piece of red cedar this side of Oak Ridge."

"You shall walk it," Flim predicted. "It is one of the most famous piratical traditions. In shark infested waters, a plank was extended over the side of the ship and all male prisoners were required to walk out it until they fell to their—death."

Jak shuddered at the pirate's calm use of the ugly archaic word. Flim inclined his head to Drusilla. "You, of course, fair lady, will be spared so awful a fate. When this creature, who, I perceive, has used you most cruelly, is no more, we shall see the stars together."

Drusilla simpered and tittered. Jak belched (the ultimate expression of disgust) for he had never seen a woman behave in such an abnormal manner. He resolved to discuss the matter with the Eugenics Counselor as soon as he reached Earth, if he did. Flim's intention to devitalize him seemed but an impossible threat since Jak had never seen anyone go through the strange process nor reviewed any remains afterward. He said, "I can't walk a plank in space. I would just drift back to the plane, unless you made a sudden change in velocity. Besides, I can last for weeks with the purifier in my suit."

"Who mentioned a spacesuit?" Flim sneered.

"Without it I couldn't walk at all."

Flim frowned ferociously. "True. Too true. Avast, how I wanted to see you walk the plank. We could take you to Earth and land on a Pacific island."

"That would take too long," Jak objected. "Let me speak for a minute." Jak placed a hand over his heart. "Captain Flim, my indoctrination makes your methods repellant, but, in my unconscious, I've a certain admiration for you. There may be some of the old romance in me. I know a way of—uh—of devitalization that you may not. I've always wished that when my time came to—uh—go, this way would be used. It's even more romantic than Walk the Plank. It's called the Firing Squad."

"The Firing Squad," Flim mused. "Never mind, Ger. Return the plank." Ger, carrying a one meter length of red cedar, shrugged and drifted back to the passage. Flim stroked the mess on his upper lip and said, "Interesting. How does the Firing Squad operate? Do I soak you in alcohol and ignite it?"

"No!" Jak gasped quickly. "The Firing Squad was men with weapons. Rifles, I think. The person to be treated stood before a wall and performed a rite called Smoking the Cigarette, whatever that was. Then an

officer gave commands, and the person was perforated by the riffles or rifles."

"What a manner to death!" exclaimed Flim.

Exhibiting great self-control, Jak did not wince at the word, although Drusilla giggled. Flim inexpertly dragged the 6 mm Morgia from the clip holster and smirked at it. He said, "We have but the single weapon, although I will have Ger and Looge stand by to simulate a complete group. I have wanted to test this pistol ever since Ger pockpicked a Patrolman in Mars Base. It is but an advanced model of the flintlock used by noble pirates of old."

"Let me show you," Jak said. His fingers barely touched the knob of the optical sight before Flim slapped them away.

"I am expert in these matters," the pirate affirmed. His gauntleted hands fumbled until he succeeded in pulling back the slide and letting it snap forward. "A wonderful modern improvement!" he exclaimed. "Henry Morgan loaded his from the other end of the barrel."

Drusilla made an unseemly noise with her mouth. "I never thought you were brave, Jak," she jeered. "Why didn't the big hero take that away from the Captain?"

"How did I know he didn't have a shell in the chamber? I didn't want you to be hurt—"

"Silence!" commanded the pirate. "Male prisoner, prepare to be perforated. Which wall shall we use?"

"Outside. I wouldn't want Drusilla to see—"

"Yes, outside. We shall spare the fair lady any unpleasantness. Don your armor, male prisoner."

"What?"

Flim said, "Your spacesuit." He bowed to Drusilla. "Soon, I shall return to claim you, fair lady. Together, we shall approach the speed of light."

Drusilla began to pant. Jak pulled his spacesuit from the rack and squirmed into it. "Aren't you going to tell me seelata?" he asked.

"Seelata, Jak," Drusilla said absently, her eyes on Flim.

Several words, the meaning of which Jak did not know, seeped from his un-
5—PLANET—Spring

conscious mind. As they became vocal, Flim glanced at him with an expression indicative of faint admiration. The pirate said, "Avast, it is the custom. All male prisoners must be deathed unless they join the jolly crew. You wish to join?"

Clutching his helmet to his aluminum breast, Jak thrust out his wedge of chin and cried, "Never! I regret having one vitality to give for my planet!"

"I salute you," said Flim, and clamped on his helmet. Ger and Looge did likewise; and Jak, with a despairing glance at the entranced Drusilla, sealed his own. Flim adjusted Jak's tuning dial and said, "Hear me?"

"Yes."

"Men! Follow the prisoner. Forward!"

They stepped out on the dark side of the Box, a right quadrangular prism of dull metal. A tube ran through the long axis of the craft with a swivel-mounted Carver Atomicket located at the center of gravity and steering jets slightly forward. By turning the Atomicket, acceleration or deceleration could result without the necessity for rotating the entire plane.

Their suits glowing with luminous paint, the four men stood for a moment beneath the starry spectacle. Jupiter, the largest celestial object in sight, appeared as a small belted moon to left. Flim placed the muzzle of the Morgia against the face of Jak's helmet.

"That's not correct!" Jak protested.

Flim lowered the pistol slightly. He said, "Are you certain all this is not a trick? I suspected something below."

Jak's heart shuddered. He wondered what would happen to Drusilla. This mental case would never take her to Earth, the only place she would have a chance. She should have realized her own peril instead of ogling the pirate. He pleaded, "No. No trick."

Flim stated, "I am prepared to death you at any instant. Be careful. How do you wish it arranged?"

"Stand at the tail, side by side, and I'll stand at the nose. That's forty meters apart. A good distance for the Firing Squad."

Jak took two jerky steps which brought him into position over the control cabin.

Jak said, "One last request. Shoot me through the faceplate. I'll devitalize in-

stantly whether you hit the brain or not."

Flim's voice crackled through the radio. "Out of respect for the fair lady below, I shall avoid brutality and accommodate you. However, I am placing Ger and Looge behind me. I still feel this may be a trick."

"That's not right. All three—"

"Behind me," Flim insisted. "What were the commands?"

Jak croaked, "Load, aim, fire."

"I'm already loaded. Aim!"

Flim extended his right arm at full length. Jak licked the dry inner surfaces of his mouth with a drier tongue.

"Fire!"

SPARKS spurted from the muzzle of the Morgia. Flim, his magnetic boots ripped from the plates by the recoil, crashed into Ger and Looge. A tangle of spacesuited legs and arms accelerated back along the course of the Box to become a luminous spot in the blackness.

Yanking a pair of snippers from his tool kit, Jak trudged along the edge of the Box and cut the cables of the grapples. He clutched the low hand rail and shoved the curvilinear side of the spacecopter. For a moment, he watched as the space between the weightless vessels widened. He dropped into the airlock.

Drusilla reclined on the astrogator's couch. She had exchanged her concealing red robe for a suit of skintight translucent coveralls. "Back so soon, captain?" she mewed. "Did he put up a last heroic struggle, or did he devitalize like the coward he was?"

Jak said, "He didn't have to be heroic. He used his brains."

Drusilla looked up. Her face blanched even under the Deepurple she had sprayed on. "Jak!" she squeaked.

Jak hung his helmet on the rack, swept some of the broken tubes and severed wires from the control board, placed them in a jagged ball in midair, and savagely canceled the flight plan. He activated the calculator. In a voice like nothing he had heard issue from his own throat, he said, "Your Captain Flim didn't know any more

about a pistol than the average citizen. At sea level on Earth, the 6 mm Morgia bullet has a muzzle velocity of 1253 meters per second; and, at a range of, say, 300 meters, the bullet rises 10.5 centimeters above the line of sight at the top of the curve it traces. Out here, with no gravity or air pressure, the bullet travels in a perfectly straight line. I ran Flim's sight all the way up, and when he tried to hit my head as I asked him, he missed me a mile—whatever that means. On Earth, he would have hit regardless of the sights. He had only one shot, because the cold of the dark side contracted the slide; and the recoil, terrific without gravity, sent him and his crew flying."

Jak left the clicking calculator and stared at the motionless Drusilla. "Don't worry about your sweetjet," he rasped. "He'll drift back to his copter. We're changing course for the Patrol station on Callisto to report and have them picked up. I hope the centrifugal force and deceleration is enough to smear you!"

"But, Jak," Drusilla moaned, "you know—"

"Don't start that again!" Jak roared. "You told me a—a dis-truth! What an act! You ought to be in tridies. At two months, Lar BW16177 on Hungaria looked like— You wanted to go to Earth because of that prize in the Photographic Salon! You wanted to taste your fame. What are you trying to do, ruin me? You don't need the Wollongong Obstetric Hospital any more than I do! I'm going back to the Rings, and you can sit on Callisto till you—yes, till you death yourself!"

"Jak," Drusilla murmured, "I never knew you could be so domineering, so," she giggled the naughty word, "masculine."

"Silence!" Jak bellowed. He darted down the passage to quarters and spurted back carrying a gray uniform soaked with tomato juice. He snarled, "I told you to clean this! Now do it!"

The silver crescent and rocket emblem of the Space Patrol still glittered through the stain. Beneath that crest appeared Jak's serial number, SP34509260.

the boy and the Star

He is old enough now to know that the ornament on the tree is more than a star . . . to understand the deeper meaning of Christmastime.

Now he knows that it is love that has been shining on the tree year after year, the love that has wrapped and held him . . . that has given him food and warmth and laughter and the promise of joy to come.

Life's great reward is the privilege of giving security to those we love.

And, think: When you make *your* home secure you are also helping make America secure. For the strength of America grows as the number of its secure homes increases.



Saving for security is easy—on the Payroll Savings Plan for investing in United States Savings Bonds.

This is all you do. Go to your company's pay office, choose the amount you want to save—a few dollars a payday, or as much as you wish. That money will be set aside for you before you even draw your pay. And automatically invested in United States Series "E" Savings Bonds which are turned over to you.

If you can save only \$3.75 a week on the Plan, in 9 years and 8 months you will have \$2,187.30.

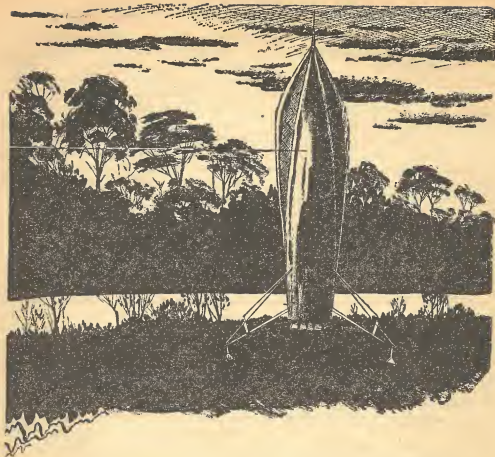
U.S. Series "E" Savings Bonds earn interest at an average of 3% per year, compounded semiannually, when held to maturity! They can go on earning interest for as long as 19 years and 8 months if you wish.

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THE BRAIN SINNER

By ALAN E. NOURSE

*An invisible network of human minds lay across the country,
delicately tuned, waiting breathlessly for the first spark
of contact from the unknown . . . from the
unpredictable telepathic Alien.*

THE ship skimmed down like a shadow from the outer atmosphere and settled gently and silently in the tangled underbrush of the hill that overlooked the bend in the broad river. There was a hiss of scorched leaves, and the piping of a small, trapped animal. Then there was silence.

Higher up, the sunlight was bright over the horizon; here the shadows had length-

ened and it was quite dark. Far across the hills a dog howled mournfully; night birds made small rustling sounds through the scrub and underbrush. The alien waited, tensely, listening, waiting with his mind open for any flicker of surprise or wonder, waiting for a whisper of fear or recognition to slip into his mind from the dark hills around the ship. He waited and waited.

Then he gave a satisfied grunt. Foolish

of him to worry. All possible care had been taken to avoid any kind of alarm. He had landed unseen from Io.

The alien stretched back against the couch, allowing his long, tight muscles to relax, as he sent inquiring feelers of thought out from the ship, probing gently and tentatively, for signs of the psi-presence. The landing, after all, had been assumed. Already the natives had convinced themselves that ships such as his were a delusion. Such simple creatures, to disregard the evidence of their own senses! There should be no problem here when the invasion began, with the preliminary studies already completed, the disguising techniques almost perfected. A primitive world, indeed, but a world with psi-presence already developing—a possible flaw in the forthcoming silent conquest.

For psi-presence could detect other psi-presence, always, anywhere, despite any disguise. The alien knew that. It was the one universal denominator in all the centuries of conquest and enslavement in his people's history. Before they could come, they must know the strength of the psi-presence on this world.

The alien moved, finally, beginning his preparations. In the center of the cabin an image flickered, swarming flecks of light and shadow that filled out a three-dimensional form, complete and detailed. The alien sat back and studied it through hooded yellow eyes—carefully, oh so carefully, for there must be no mistake, not here, not now. The scouts had come and gone, bringing back the data and specimens of the man-things necessary for a satisfactory disguise. Now the alien stared at the image, regarding the bone structure and muscle contour critically. Then, slowly, he began work with the plastiflesh, modelling the sharp angles of his members into neat curves, skillfully laying folds of skin, molding muscle bulges and jointed fingers, always studying the strange, clumsy image that flickered before him.

It was the image of a man. That was what they called themselves. There were many of them, and somewhere among them there was psi-presence, feeble and underdeveloped, but there somewhere. He eyed the image again, and pressed a stud on the con-

trol panel, and another image met his eyes, an electronic reflection of himself. He studied it, and carefully superimposed the two, adding contour here and there, yellow eyes seeking out imperfections as he worked.

There must be no mistake. Failure would mean disgrace and death, horrible, writhing death by dissociation and burning, neuron by neuron. He knew. He had officiated at, executions before; delightful experiences, but not to be trifled with. He stared at the image again and then at himself.

THE skin tone was wrong. The yellow came through too clearly in places, and in this strange culture that color was reported to carry unpleasant connotations. He worked pale, sickly-pink stuff into his soft, wrinkle-free skin, then molded out the cheeks and forehead. Hair would be a problem, of course, but then there would be many small imperfections. He smiled grimly to himself. There were other ways of masking imperfections.

At last he was satisfied. There was no way to bring the normal reddish color into the pale green lips; there was no way to satisfactorily prepare the myriad wrinkles and creases that crossed the skin of the man-things, but with a little skillful application of projection techniques it did not matter.

The alien struggled into the tight, restricting clothes that lay in a bundle, carefully folded and pressed, at his feet. The hard, board-like shoes cut at his ankles, and the hairy stuff of the red-and-white checked shirt made him writhe in discomfort, but once outside the ship he was glad for the warmth. He stepped out onto the ground, and listened again carefully. Then he made certain arrangements with wires, and threw a switch on a small black case near the air lock, and began marching down the hill away from the ship.

He would no longer need the ship. Not now.

The underbrush grew thicker, and he fought his way through the scrub until he reached a roadway. It was not paved. A flicker of sour amusement swept through the alien's mind. They had been afraid that these simple creatures might try to oppose them! Yet the scouts had said that far to the East were great stone and steel cities—

the places-of-madness, the scout had said. Perhaps. But here there was no stone and steel, only dust, and the ruts of wagon wheels, and a howling dog somewhere over the hill.

The alien trudged on for almost an hour, trying to acclimate his legs to the fierce tug of gravity that pulled at him. And then he stopped short and listened.

He heard them, then, in the depths of his mind, somewhere on the other side of the hill. His eyes narrowed. No psi-presence there, but two of the man-things, beyond doubt. Other whispers, too dull, stupid, vagrant whispers flickering through his mind. Lower life forms, no doubt. Possibly a farm with work animals. The scouts had said there were such. He turned off the road and almost cried out when the sharp barbs of a fence cut through his tender skin.

A trickle of green dripped down his arm, until he rubbed a poultice across it, and it became smooth and sickly-pink again. With a vicious jerk he pulled the fence out, post and all, and left it on the ground, moving through the woods toward the sounds he had heard.

Soon the woods ended and he saw the dwelling across a broad clearing. Black dirt lay open in the moonlight. He started across. There was light inside the dwelling, and the dull, babbling flow of uncontrolled man-thought struck his mind like a vapor. There were other buildings, too, dark buildings, and one tall one that had a spoked wheel on top, and creaked and rustled in the darkness.

He had almost reached the dwelling when a small, four-legged creature jumped up in the darkness, crying out at him in a horrible discordant barrage. The creature came running swiftly, and the alien's mind caught the sharp whine of fear and hate emanating from the thing. It stopped before him, baring its fangs and snarling.

The alien lashed his foot out savagely; it crunched into flesh and bone, and the creature lay flopping helplessly, spurring dark wet stuff, its cry cut off in mid-yelp. The alien stepped onto the porch as the door opened suddenly, framing a tall, thin man-thing in a box of yellow light. "Brownie?" he called. "Come here, Brownie! What's the matter—" His words

trailed off when he saw the alien. "Who are you?"

"A traveller," said the alien, his voice grating harshly in the darkness. "I need lodging and food—"

The farmer's eyes narrowed suspiciously as he peered from the doorway. "Come closer, let me get a look at you," he said.

The alien stepped closer, concentrating all his psi-faculties on the farmer's mind, blurring his perception of the minute imperfections of his disguise. It required all his power; he had none left to probe the farmer's mind, and he waited, trembling. That could come later.

The farmer blinked, and nodded, finally. "All right," he said. "We've got some food on the stove. Come on in."

II

SENATORIAL Councilman Benjamin Towne slammed his cane down on the floor with a snarl, and eased himself back down in his seat, staring angrily around the small Federal Security Commission anteroom. The American Council attaché standing near the door retrieved the cane, handing it to the Councilman with a polite murmur. Instantly he regretted his action when Towne began slapping the cane against his palm, short staccato slaps that rang out ominously in the small room.

The Councilman was not in the habit of waiting. He did not like it in the least, and made no effort to conceal his feelings. His little green cat eyes roved around the room in sharp disapproval, resting momentarily on the neat autodesk, on the cool grey walls, on the vaguely disturbing watercolor on the wall—one of those sickening Psi-High experimentals that the snob critics all claimed to be so wonderful. The Councilman growled and blinked at the morning sunlight streaming through the muted glass panels of the northeast wall. Far below, the second morning rush hour traffic buzzed through the city with frantic nervousness.

The Councilman tapped his cane on the floor, glancing up at his attaché. "That Sanders girl," he snapped. "Give me her file again."

The Council attaché opened a large briefcase, and produced a thick bundle of papers

in a manilla folder. Towne took them and glanced through the papers, lighting one of his long, green-tipped cigarettes from a ruby-studded lighter. "How about Dr. Abrams? Was he questioned?"

The attaché nodded in embarrassment. "Nothing doing. He ran us in circles."

Towne's scowl deepened. "Did you give him the Treatment?"

"He just wasn't having any, sir. Said he'd answer to a Joint Council hearing, and nothing less."

"Stubborn old goat. He knows I've got nothing that will stand up in a Council hearing." Towne went back to the papers again, still tapping the floor with the cane. "Damn that Roberts!"

The attaché glanced down at Benjamin Towne with some curiosity. It was easy to see how the man drew such powerful support from his constituents. There was something overwhelming about his appearance—the heavy jaw and grim mouth line, the shock of sandy hair that fell over his forehead, the burning green eyes, the stout, well muscled body. The attaché's eyes drifted down to the withered left leg and the grotesque twisted foot, and he looked away in embarrassment. What was so awe-inspiring about a crippled man who accumulated great power? Towne certainly had done that. Some said that Ben Towne was the most powerful man in North America. Some also said that he was the greatest man, but that was something quite different indeed. And some said that he was the most dangerous man alive. The attaché shivered. That was none of his business. If he went probing that line too far they'd be calling him Psi-High, and he liked his job too much to risk that.

The inner door opened and a tall man with prematurely gray hair strode in, followed by a girl in her early twenties. "Sorry to keep you, Councilman," the man said. "No, no, don't get up. We can talk right here."

Towne had made no effort to rise. He glared at the man, and then his eyes drifted to the girl and widened angrily. "I said a *private* conference, Roberts. I don't want one of these damned brain-picking snakes in the same room with me."

The man nodded coolly to the girl. "Sit

down, Jean. Councilman, this is Jean Sanders. If you're here about the Alien investigation, I want her to sit in."

Ben Towne slowly set the papers down on the floor. "Record this, Roger," he said to the attaché. His eyes turned to Roberts. "I understand he slipped out of your hands again yesterday," he said with vicious smoothness. "A pity."

Roberts reddened. "That's right. He slipped out clean."

"No pictures, no identifications, no nothing, eh?"

"I'm afraid not."

Towne's voice was deadly. "Mr. Roberts, an unidentified Alien creature has been at large in this country for three solid weeks, and your Federal Security teams haven't even gotten near him. I want to know why."

"I'd suggest that if you read our reports—"

"Damn you, man, I didn't come here for insolence!" Towne slammed the cane down with a clatter. "You're answerable to the Joint Senatorial Council of the North American States for every wretched thing you do, and I'm ready to bring charges of criminal negligence against you in this Alien investigation—"

"*Criminal negligence!*" Roberts jumped up, his eyes blazing. "My god, Councilman! We've thrown everything we have into this search. This creature has played us for fools every step of the way! We didn't even get a look at his ship. It blew up right in our faces! Do you realize what we're fighting here?"

"I realize quite well," said Towne, frostily. "You're fighting an Alien who has slipped into our population, somehow, and just vanished. There's no way to tell what he wants or what he's doing. The potential danger of his presence is staggering. And you've fumbled and groaned for three weeks without even turning up a hot trail. You haven't even a coherent description of him—"

"We're fighting a telepath," Roberts said softly. "An Alien with telepathic powers like nothing we've ever dreamed of. That's what we're fighting. And we're losing, too."

The girl across the room stirred uneasily. Ben Towne's green eyes shot over to her

viciously. "And you're using freaks like her to help him hide, I suppose."

"Jean Sanders is not a freak." Robert's voice grated in the still air of the room. "She's Psi-High, and she's the most valuable asset we've got in this search at the present moment. It's a real pity there aren't more Psi-Highs that have had her training."

"And you sit there and tell me you'd dare use Psi-Highs in an investigation as critical as this?"

Roberts sighed in disgust. "Councilman, you don't have any idea what you're saying."

"I beg to differ," Towne's eyes flashed. "I happen to be aware that there are a group of individuals wandering around loose who will have this country in chains in a hundred years if they're allowed to develop as they please. Psi-Highs are a vicious menace, nothing more nor less. We can't help it that we have them. The fools in the government were blind two hundred years ago when they first started appearing, and psi-factors are gene-controlled. But they can't use their extra-sensory powers without training."

He picked up the cane and leaned forward at Roberts. "Thanks to Reuben Abram's meddling over at the Hoffman Center, some of them are already developing their psi-faculties, learning to use a treacherous power that has no place in civilized society. Well, *I don't want them working in Security!* Is that clear enough?"

Roberts sighed tiredly and leaned back in his chair. "You're confused a little," he said. "This is not the Rotary Club. It's not a Federal Isolationist rally, and it's not the Senate floor, either. It's just me you're talking to. And to my knowledge, you haven't succeeded as yet in removing all Psi-High rights. You've gotten laws through Congress to make them take tests and submit to registration; you've passed laws to prevent them from marrying; you've blocked their education and hamstringed their training and development, but you *haven't*, as yet, been able to strip them of their citizenship—"

"Not as yet," said Ben Towne.

"And you can't, as yet, dictate the activities of the Federal Security Commission."

"Not as yet."

Roberts' eyes blazed. "All right. Now you can listen to me for a minute, Councilman,

recording or no recording. We've got an enemy in our midst—an Alien we've never even seen. We can thank a psi-positive citizen out in Des Moines for spotting him in the first place. He had the sense and the loyalty to report it to us. Normal psi-negative individuals can't see him, can't identify him, can't even get near him. We haven't tried Psi-High agents against him yet but we're going to have to, whether you like it or not. Psi-negatives are strapped. The Alien can run circles around them. Our only hope of catching him is to use psi-positive agents, the best-trained we can get our hands on. Like Jean, here. And if you want to stop me you'll have to reorganize Federal Security to do it."

Towne lurched to his feet, his face white. "I may do that, Roberts." He reached for his cane. "I may just do that."

"You'll have to throw the Liberal Council out of office first. They're supporting me, and outvoting your American Council two to one."

Towne gave him a shrewd look. "Better start watching the telecasts, and newstapes," he said bluntly. "Already there are rumors going around about a mysterious Alien fugitive. Oh, I know it's top secret, but you know how news leaks." He gave a nasty smile. "People get nervous about rumors like that, especially when the Administration denies them so sharply. You'd better catch him pretty quick." He nodded to his attaché, and limped to the door. Then he glanced back over his shoulder. "Be sure to watch the telecasts," he said, and slammed the door behind him.

Jean Sanders stood up, white-faced and trembling. "What a vicious man," she murmured. "What did he mean, Bob?"

Robert Roberts shook his head, and fished a cigar from a desk drawer. "I'm not sure that I know," he said slowly.

III

PAUL FAIRCLOTH finished reading the teletape briefing just as the little jet plane slipped down toward the hangar slot in South Chicago. He slapped the spools into the erasure can and flipped the control switch to activate the distortion field inside the can. He stretched his legs, then, won-

dering vaguely whether he was going to come out of this whole mess alive.

Jean's parting hug was still warm in his memory, and he remembered the worry in her big grey eyes as she had kissed him and said, "Be careful, darling. I wish I could go, too. I couldn't bear to have anything happen—" It was the first time she had ever actually spoken that word to him, and he was glad she had. Almost defiantly glad. She had said it aloud, and she had said so much, much more without words. Only vague shadows in Faircloth's untrained mind, but he knew the meaning of those shadows.

A man was waiting down below on the platform for him. The hangar vault was dark and deserted. He took the agent's card and scanned it briefly. "Marino? I'm Paul Faircloth. Better give me a late briefing."

Marino nodded. He was small and wiry, with catlike movements and exceedingly bright eyes under his jet black eyebrows. "We'd be wise to get on over while we talk," he said.

Faircloth nodded and stepped into the little tube-car that was waiting at the end of the platform. It was a tight fit for two men, and Paul ducked by reflex as it gave a lurch and dipped down the chute into a narrow tunnel, hanging free and speeding ahead on its electronic guide beam. "Is the Condor Building where he was spotted?"

Marino nodded. "In Center City, Chicago. First thirty-six floors are commercial, and the twenty above are residential. He's pinned pretty definitely on the forty-second, in a large residential suite. No idea why he chose it or how long he's been there—" He turned apologetic eyes to Faircloth. "I'm Psi-High—I guess you know. We've got him located and triangulated, and we can keep him pretty well pinned if he doesn't try to give us a shower. We're pretty sure he knows we're there."

"Shower?"

Marino nodded, grimly tapping his forehead. "A barrage, the works. This Alien's got a powerful psi. And I mean powerful. He gave it to one of our Psi-High men yesterday. It was savage. Nearly ripped him apart."

Faircloth shivered. "But you can keep track of him."

"Yes." Marino lit a cigarette with nervous fingers. "Roberts put Psi-Highs out to spot him, but he doesn't want any Psi-Highs in on the kill." His voice was flat with disappointment. "Political pressure, I guess. People couldn't bear to give a Psi-High credit for anything—" He glanced at Faircloth and reddened. "Sorry. No offense. It just slipped out." He bit his lip. "Anyway, that's what you're here for. Half a dozen other psi-negatives will help you. I hope God'll be helping you too."

Faircloth grinned tightly. "Got you nervous?"

"It's got me plenty nervous."

Faircloth nodded again, rubbing a hand across his eyes. "All right. I want your best men, every one of them, to go in with me. I don't care whether they're Psi-High or not. Neither does Roberts; he's with you folks all the way. But we've got to get this creature and get him cold. He's slick. Is the building sewed up?"

"Tight as a vacutainer."

"Good. Keep it under cover, and try to keep the Psi-Highs from broadcasting any more than necessary."

Marino gave him a queer look. "They'll do their best, of course."

"Right." Faircloth ran a hand through his brown hair and loosened his tie a trifle. "As soon as the building is cleared from rush hour, I want the power shut off all over the building. Elevators, lights, everything. We'll be on the 41st floor, and a squad will be on the 43rd. We'll close in together."

Marino shook his head. "I hope it works. They had him just as tight in Des Moines last week, and he slid right through." The man's eyes were worried. "We just don't know what we're fighting. That's the whole trouble. Even the Psi-Highs are up a tree."

THE car gave a lurch and slid to a stop. They stepped out into a shiny tunnel filled with people emptying out of the huge building above. The two men waited to board an express surface elevator, and stepped off on the main concourse of the Condor Building. The last sunset rays made a dazzling golden display on the banks of heliomirrors, and Faircloth blinked, shielding his eyes a moment after the softer light

below. Then he glanced at his watch. "Let's coffee up," he said. "We've got a few minutes."

They slid into an eating booth on the concourse and dropped in coins for coffee. It was so clumsy, Faircloth thought. Three and a half weeks since the ship had been spotted down along the Mississippi, and they were still just learning how clumsy they were. They had even thought that the visitor, whoever he was, had been killed in landing until the first Security Team had gotten to the ship. They'd gotten to within just ten feet of it when it had exploded. And even then they hadn't realized what they'd found, until the report came from Des Moines, and they started following up leads. They had followed the alien, true, from the first farmhouse where he had stopped the night he landed, west through the farm country to Des Moines, then northeast to the great Chicago metropolis. But when it came to contacting the creature or capturing him—Faircloth shook his head. Clumsy just wasn't the right word.

He glanced at Marino, and then reached across the booth and buzzed for a news-tape. He glanced over the Washington news hurriedly. Another upheaval in the Liberal Council. The Northern Democrats were trying to drum up Civil Rights Party and One World Party support for their new South American Development program, and they weren't getting to first base. And there was another vicious attack by Ben Towne on the Hoffman Center's training program for Psi-Highs. Towne had even named Reuben Abrams as a leader there, and worked in some high-grade anti-Semitic innuendo into the association. Paul went tense, searching for Jean's name. It was not mentioned. He took a deep breath. If that filthy dog ever dragged her name into public. He finished his coffee, and gave the repeat button a vicious jab.

Then his eye caught a small item with a Des Moines dateline, well hidden down at the bottom of the backside of the tape. He read it, frowning:

WOMAN CHARGES PSI-HIGH CONSPIRACY

Des Moines, Ia., 27 June, 2157. A woman whose name was withheld today placed charges against Miss Martha Bishop, 23, of Oak Park Section, Chi-

cago, whose name is listed in the Federal psi-positive registry. The charge was made at local Federal Security offices, and accused Miss Bishop of mental interference. The victim, who allegedly had information concerning the rumors of an Alien visitor which have been persistently appearing lately, claimed that Miss Bishop had attempted to prevent her from reporting her information. After failing in this attempt, Miss Bishop was charged with using her psi-powers to erase the information from the woman's mind. Miss Bishop could not be reached for comment.

Mr. J. B. Dunlap, spokesman for the Liberal Senatorial Council in Washington, has repeatedly denied that the rumor of alien visitors has any basis in fact. Nevertheless, the charges against Miss Bishop are being investigated fully—

Faircloth crumpled the tape with a snarl and returned to his coffee. Finally he nodded to Marino. "Drink up," he said, "and get in touch with your men. It's time to go."

Ted Marino left for the elevators to corral his men, arranging to meet Faircloth in the concourse five minutes later. Paul found a visiphone relay booth, and sank his long, lean body down in a relaxer facing the screen. The last of the rush-hour people were still drifting by in the corridor; Paul watched them anxiously. Then he gave a nervous laugh, forcing himself to relax for a moment. If only Jean were here! He battled an impulse to call her. Finally he dialed the priority code for the Federal Security Commission offices in Washington.

The relays clicked, and the code carried him through the front-line secretaries without any trouble. He gave a sigh of relief. He was in no mood to argue with secretaries. A moment later he was blinking at Roberts' tri-di image on the screen.

Roberts' face looked haggard. He nodded to Faircloth. "You got there, then. Good. How does it look, Paul?"

"Everything's just real nice," Faircloth growled. "They think they've got him pinned. The building here has a central power source, and we can bottleneck the whole place if we time it right."

"Don't miss, Paul." Roberts' voice was tense. "Whatever you do, don't miss."

"What's the matter?"

"Ben Towne has worked his way into this."

"Oh, god!"

"Well, I can't help it, there was nothing I could do. He has the whole American Council behind him, and the Liberals can't hold out long on negative results. Towne

has the whole picture now, and if we don't wrap it up fast, things here in the Capitol are going to blow sky high."

Faircloth scowled. "Did you see the news-tapes tonight?"

"You mean the Bishop girl in Des Moines?" Roberts nodded unhappily. "Got the report from Des Moines on it this afternoon. Trumped up from beginning to end. I tell you, Towne is not playing around. I don't know how he plans to work things, but I'm afraid that story was just a starter. He'll do everything he can to tie the Alien up with the Psi-Highs in the public eye—and you know Ben Towne when he gets rolling. He'll play this rumor business up to the hilt. And the way things are in the Senate now, that could mean real trouble."

"Who's controlling Security news releases?"

Roberts gave a short laugh. "Take a guess. Just one guess. Don't miss tonight, my friend."

FAIRCLOTH nodded and signalled off.

He sat swearing quietly to himself for a few moments. Then Marino came by, and he swung out into the hall again, glancing at his watch. "Ready?"

Marino nodded. "Got the squads placed on the 41st and 43rd. Power goes off when we step off the elevator on the 41st. Okay?"

Faircloth grunted, and spread out a floor plan of the 42nd floor. "Is the building all clear?"

"All the commercial levels, yes. And autolocks go on all the doors but the one we want when the power goes off."

"Good. At least we shouldn't have residents underfoot. You've got Psi-Highs posted outside the building?"

"Yes, in 'copters. Circling the building fairly close, out of sight range of the 42nd."

"All right. We'll move in on him as soon as the power goes off. I want cameras going everywhere—in the corridors, in the stairwells, even in the 'copters outside. If there's a slip-up, I want to see where he goes, and especially I want a picture of him. A *good* picture of him. Maybe he can fuzz up human eyesight, but he'll have a hell of a time fuzzing up a camera. Let's go."

They stepped on the elevator, felt it rush up to the 41st floor. They stepped off. As

the door closed behind them, the whirring motors died, and the lights went out. Faircloth led the way swiftly to the closed stairwell where they met four other men, one with a motion camera. "Cover everything," Paul said sharply. "If you see him, stop him with a shocker, not with pellets. We want him alive." He opened the stairwell and started up with the men behind him. Moments later they met part of the group from the 43rd; they started swiftly down the dark corridor toward the pinpointed residential suite.

And then, like a savage blow, a wall of fire exploded in Faircloth's brain. He gave a scream and jerked out his arms in an agonized convulsion. He fell forward on his face.

Wave after wave of searing agony burned through his brain; he jerked on the floor, trying to scream again, unable to force a sound through his twisted lips. He heard shouts around him, and a whistle shrilled; there were running feet. Somebody tripped over him, tumbled to the floor with a bone jarring crash. Three shots rang out even as he dragged himself to his knees.

He was blinded; he had never felt such horrible, driving pain, and he clawed along the wall as more footsteps echoed frantically in the corridor. Suddenly Marino was shaking his arm, and together they burst through the open door of the suite as a roar of derisive laughter tore through his mind.

Faircloth opened his eyes and saw the empty room through a burning red haze of pain. He collapsed on a chair, exhausted, as Marino threw open all the doors. He gave a shout down the hall and others came running.

Unbelieving, Faircloth stared around him, then looked frantically at Marino. "You—you got him on the stairs?"

Marino shook his head miserably. "Nobody could see him. Not a soul."

The hoarse laughter grew louder in Faircloth's ears. "The cameras!" he gasped.

"Three of them are smashed. I don't know about the rest—"

"You're certain?"

Marino didn't answer. The answer was obvious. The Alien had slipped away like a ghost in the night.

IV

ROBERT ROBERTS was waiting, nervous as a cat, when Faircloth arrived at the Security office. There were deep circles under his pale grey eyes, and a dark stubble on his chin. He greeted Paul with a silent handshake; then they went back into the rear office, with its modern panelled wall looking out across the valley to the tall white buildings of the Capitol. Once it had been an inspiring sight to Faircloth. Now he hardly even noticed. A rocket rose in the morning air, leaving its white vapor trail like a pillar of cloud behind it. The weekly Venus rocket, probably, or maybe one of the dozens of speculator ships off for Titan. Faircloth scowled and sank into a relaxer with a sigh. "I'm sorry, Bob," he said. "It was a bust. I couldn't help it."

Roberts mixed a drink and shoved it across the desk to Paul; then he touched off the end of a long black cigar. "What's done is done," he said sourly. "You thought he was sewed up, and it turned out that he wasn't." He turned worried eyes to Faircloth. "What we've got to know is why he wasn't sewed up. Something went sour. What was it?"

Faircloth was silent for a long moment. Then he said: "I think the whole approach is sour."

"Very possibly. How do you mean?"

"I mean we're outclassed, that's what. This Alien is out of our league—way out." His eyes caught Roberts'. "He's a telepath, Bob, and I don't mean halfway. He's not just a feeble, groping, half-baked, half-trained, poorly developed Psi-High human. I mean we're dealing with telepathic power no human Psi-High ever even dreamed of—"

Roberts' lips were tight. "Exactly what happened in Chicago?"

"That's just it, I don't know." Faircloth sprang to his feet, his face white. "Look, Bob, the building was virtually escape-proof. The boys had every exit guarded three ways from Sunday. The power was off in the entire building, and there was no way he could get out short of walking through walls. And we had the walls guarded just in case he could. We got him sewed up, and then we went in to get him, and

WHAMMO!" Faircloth clenched his fists, trembling. "I don't want to go through that again, Bob, not for anything. It was murderous. And the horrible part of it was that he wasn't using his full power on me. What I got was just a gentle rap on the knuckles—"

"And he slid through."

"Clean. Smashed the cameras; got away without leaving a trace."

Roberts shook his head, and fished a folder from his desk. "He didn't smash all the cameras." He shoved the pictures across to Paul. "See what you make of those."

Faircloth blinked at them. There were several frames, obviously printed from motion film. Pictures of a man-like figure running down a passageway. The face was not visible. "Not much help," said Faircloth. "Gives us a clothing description, maybe. Nothing else. He certainly looks human enough!"

Roberts nodded sourly. "At that distance anything would. Can't even get reliable measurements. And you didn't even see him?"

Faircloth shook his head. "Like I said, the whole approach is sour. You're never going to get him this way."

"You've got some ideas, I suppose?"

"I have."

"Well, thank God somebody has." Some of the tiredness left Roberts' face. "Let's have them."

Paul Faircloth lit a cigarette and slowly shook his head. "Sorry," he said. "First I want some answers. Straight answers about a certain individual."

Roberts' eyes narrowed. "You mean Ben Towne."

"That's right."

Roberts scowled and threw down his cigar. "All right, I'll tell you about Ben Towne. It isn't pretty. Frankly, this Chicago fiasco was the break Towne has been waiting for. There were Psi-Highs involved in that raid. Towne knows it. And he's going to build a story of Psi-High alliance with the Alien that will carry him to the White House."

Faircloth nodded grimly. "Does he have any conception of the dangerousness of this creature?"

ROBERTS snorted. "Of course he knows it! But Ben Towne is obsessed with a single idea, and it twists everything he thinks into horrible distortion." He leaned forward, staring at Paul. "Benjamin Towne wants to wipe psi-positive faculties off the face of the Earth. He hates Psi-Highs. Oh, I don't know the motives behind it. Maybe the fact of his own imperfect body makes him hate what he considers a sort of super-perfection appearing in the human race. It's a false premise, of course. The predisposition of certain people to high extra-sensory powers is neither a perfection nor an imperfection.

"It's just another tiny step in the evolutionary chain. It happens to be a dominant gene factor, and in our society it happens to put the Psi-High in a slightly advantageous position in comparison to psinegatives."

Roberts threw up his hands. "But the motives don't really matter. Towne was smart enough to realize that there were lots of people who hated and feared the expansion of Psi-Highs in our society. He started fighting against it, and he's ridden that fight right into the Chairmanship of the American Senatorial Council. If he can split up the Liberal Council just a little bit, he can throw them out of office, and move his American Party right in."

"And where does the Alien fit in?"

Roberts shrugged. "It's obvious, isn't it? Towne has taken an issue and split the country wide open with it. And now, along comes a visitor from the stars, an Alien visitor who steps out of his ship and just disappears like a spirit into the population. An Alien who is fully telepathic. Towne can control the news releases; he has the power to decide on the security classification of information about the Alien. It's been kept top secret up 'til now. But Ben can control the news, and he can tie Psi-High humans and a vicious enemy Alien together so neatly in the public mind that every Psi-High in the country will be in danger of his life. It's political dynamite, and Towne is controlling the fuse."

Faircloth's face was white. "And if the Alien is caught?"

"All the better for Towne. Then the 'rumored' liason between Psi-High humans

and invaders from space can be 'proved.' Towne is in the driver's seat."

Faircloth nodded bitterly, and stood up, shaking the creases out of his trousers. His face was grim. As he reached for his hat, his hand was trembling. "That's just about the way I had it lined up, too," he said. "Good-bye, Bob. Have a nice hunt."

"Sit down, Paul."

"Sorry. I'm not working on Ben Towne's payroll."

"I think you are," Roberts snapped. His eyes flashed, and he sat up straight behind the desk. "You're going to work with us, and you're going to follow through to the bitter end. You and Jean both."

Faircloth's eyes darkened. "Jean is not involved in this."

"I am afraid she is. Just as deep as you are. And you and Jean are going to do what I tell you in this investigation whether you happen to like it or not. That is, if you ever want to marry Jean—"

Faircloth whistled on Roberts, his eyes blazing. "What do you mean by that?" he said softly. "What are you trying to say?"

Roberts' eyes caught Paul's, and held them. "I'm saying that you happen to be a Psi-High, Paul. And I just happen to know it."

PAUL FAIRCLOTH sank down in the chair again, staring at Robert's face. There was silence in the room for a long time. Then Paul said, "That's a pretty bad joke, Bob."

Roberts nodded sharply, his eyes twinkling. "I'll say it's a joke. It's a colossal horse laugh—on Ben Towne. He was so sure that that private file of his contained the names and histories of every psi-positive individual in the country! It's a horse on you, too. It's against Federal law to forge examination papers, Paul. It's against the law for a Psi-High to be unregistered. Both state and Federal registration are required. And it's against the law for two Psi-Highs to be married, regardless of their stage of development. Jean's work with Dr. Abrams has developed her powers amazingly in the last couple of years. Yours must be pretty crude, in order to keep them hidden so well—"

"You've gone out of your mind," said Faircloth flatly.

"Sorry, my friend. I'm afraid not."

"But you have no proof—"

"True, its strictly a hunch, and a little personal investigation. You were through school when the registry law went through, and you must have found somebody to leak the examination to you early. How you did it, I neither know nor care. But all I need is a good strong suspicion to subpoena you over to the Hoffman Center for a test." He smiled at Faircloth. "Care to have me call Dr. Abrams? He's got some nice definitive tests—"

Faircloth's eyes fell. "That won't be necessary." He sighed, and sank wearily back into the relaxer. "I knew it would be spotted sooner or later. I even thought for a while that Marino had spotted it."

"He had."

Faircloth nodded listlessly. "All right. What do you want, Bob?"

Roberts' eyes were excited. "I want you to work with me. I think we can get this Alien and sink Ben Towne's raft at the same time. There's no single person in the country as dangerous to Towne right now as an unregistered and unrecognized Psi-High. And that's just what you are. And with you and Jean working this thing as a team, I think we can turn the capture of the Alien to the benefit of all Psi-Highs."

Faircloth nodded slowly. "It could be done if my ideas are any good. And they certainly would require Jean to put them across."

"Then you're with me?"

"Okay. You've got the ace." Faircloth gave a defeated grin. "I'll probably hate you for this but let's get Jean over here and do some planning. The first job on the docket is to pin this Alien and keep him pinned."

V

JEAN SANDERS tossed her pencil down on the desk and flopped down cross-legged on the floor. "I think we're going around in circles," she said disgustedly. "Three separate circles," she added, with an owlish glance at Bob Roberts.

"All right, we're tired," the Security

chief sighed. "We've been at this for hours."

"It's here," Faircloth said stubbornly. "We've got all the information we need, if we can only pin down the application. Or at least we've got enough information to make a start."

"The more I see of the whole business," said the girl, "the more it looks fishy to me." She lit a cigarette thoughtfully. Her face was slender, with black brows and big grey eyes, and her slim figure made her look sixteen. "And it gets fishier and fishier the more we talk."

Paul nodded. "Exactly. There's something that we aren't seeing or realizing or that we just don't know about this creature."

"Well, let's try classifying what we do know," said Roberts. "We've got a picture that isn't worth a plugged nickel. We've got a few photos of the outside of the ship before it exploded. We know that he's psi-triple-high, fully telepathic, with the ability to fuzz up his observer's perception of him."

"Disguise," said Jean. "It isn't perfect. He needs that to hide the wrinkles in the disguise."

Faircloth walked across the room, staring at the walls. "Then there's the ship. It was found near Gutenberg, Iowa, on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi, three months ago. That's a fact. Farm kids found the ship but didn't go near it. Scared stiff. Told their father and he called Security. I don't suppose there was any way of telling how long the ship had been there?"

Roberts shook his head. "Biologists and geologists both had a whack at it, but the explosion destroyed all the flora and ground area within twenty feet of it."

"Well, anyway, no occupant of the ship was found, and no trace of where the occupant might have gone. Security sent a scout squad down to photograph the ship and it blew into a million pieces."

"That's right."

"How many of the million pieces were recovered?"

"About ten. Magnesium alloy. Told us nothing."

Faircloth nodded. "Okay. Then the Psi-High report came in from Des Moines, and you turned up the farmer and his wife who saw the Alien the first night. What was

their name? Bettendorf, I think. Jacob Bettendorf. Rather dull folks. They fed him and sent him on his way. Noticed nothing odd, but the farmer said his eyes felt tired all the time the creature was there. How did their description jive with the others you've gotten?"

Roberts shrugged. "The same—or I should say, uniformly different. Nobody seems to agree. It's obvious that they don't actually see him in any detail at all. They just think they do."

"You know," said the girl, suddenly, "that's one of the things that bothers me. A lot of those people out there are Ben Towne's stoutest supporters. They don't like Psi-Highs. They keep their eyes open for people that act like Psi-Highs—you know, the way we're likely to nod and start answering a question before a person gets it half asked—or the way we sometimes forget our expressions when we've had an accidental peep at some sweet innocent young girl's inner thoughts. Those people can spot that. But the Alien went right through. Not even a suspicion."

"He got into the city fast, though," said Roberts. "City folks are likely to be a lot less observant than country people."

"All right," said Paul. "That fits well enough. Now, since he destroyed his ship, we can assume that he is planning to stay a while. That probably means that there have been others before him. He's too confident for an advance scout. He knew he could mingle, and stay, and observe, and learn, and get away with it. Probably his job is to accumulate information, detailed information about human beings, and with full blown telepathy he must really be making hay. And unless I miss my guess, the information he wants most of all is information about Psi-Highs." Faircloth faced Roberts and the girl. "This is beginning to add up now. I don't think we're going to catch him in a dragnet. No matter how skillfully it's laid. No matter how many Psi-Highs we have on it, and no matter how well trained they are."

Roberts looked disgusted. "Then you're saying that we aren't going to get him, period."

"Oh. no. I think we can catch him. At least I've got an angle that's worth trying.

We'll have no way of evaluating it first, because of the nature of the thing, but in the end we'll either have the Alien or we won't, and I think there's a good chance that we will. If we keep playing the Chicago game we'll lose every time."

"But what went wrong in Chicago?" Roberts cried.

"Nothing, except that we were licked before we started. Look at it this way. He's outguessed us every time. And if you analyze that a little, it's not really surprising that he has because he's telepathic. He does not need a twenty-page report and a road map to know what's going on around him. All he needs is a hint. Just a bare touch of man's mind, a slight flicker of contact, and he has enough of a head start to sit down and figure out everything that's going to happen from then on. Just like a chess game. You play along and suddenly your opponent makes a move that reveals a whole gambit which you hadn't been able to see before. But our Alien friend spots the gambit on the basis of the first move instead of the tenth. We make a move and he has it pinned. He knows we operate along fairly logical lines. He can follow out the logical possibilities before they happen, and there's no possible way we can trap him. Psi-Highs or no Psi-Highs."

Roberts scowled at him. "Then what do you propose?"

Faircloth grinned. "It should be obvious by this time. We feed the computer with all the evidence we have, and let it meditate a while and plot out a supremely logical approach to trap the creature on the basis of what we know of him now. Then we take that supremely logical approach, and change it a bit. We change it into a completely *illogical* approach."

THE call they were waiting for came through at three o'clock one morning, after they had almost given it up in despair.

It had been a long, heartbreaking wait. Time after time Faircloth had pleaded that they must have been very close in Chicago, closer than they realized, that the Alien was just temporarily frightened, because there had been no sign, no clue to the Alien's whereabouts, no sign that he was even in existence since the Chicago raid. Yet Fair-

cloth felt sure that sooner or later the contact would come.

It was possible, of course, that the change in the search pattern had worried the Alien. Logically, a dragnet should have been set up in Chicago, and the entranceways to all the large cities guarded carefully. That was what the computer had said. "Probability is very strong that the Alien desires to remain in a city, but suggests that Chicago may not be the optimum location for him. Recommended heavy Security measures be taken in Chicago and surrounding cities of size. The probability is very high that the Alien is seeking some specific information. Advise close control of all spaceports, air, and rolling-road escapeways—"

And so forth. That was what the computer had said. Of course, the computer was far from infallible, but its analysis and recommendations were utterly logical on the basis of the information given it. That was exactly why they were carefully ignored.

It was a gamble, and no one was more aware of this than Faircloth. All Security personnel were withdrawn from the Chicago area, Psi-High and otherwise, except for a small crew headed by Ted Marino, who were scattered throughout the city. A gamble, but it was not entirely guesswork that made Paul so certain that the Alien, if left quite alone, would try to make contact with a Psi-High mind sooner or later. Of course, that conclusion itself was the result of logical reasoning. No matter what efforts were made to remove logic from the approach, it crept in. It had to creep in.

It was logical that a telepathically sensitive creature visiting a strange planet would seek to learn something about the segment of the population that could expose his presence. He would seek signs of his own kind of thought. Paul knew too well that a Psi-High mind that was cut off and alone was a sick mind. That was why Psi-Highs always settled in the cities, why they sought each other with such fierce, desperate clannishness which in itself had bred suspicion of them in the minds of psi-negatives. It was not a matter of choice, with them. It was a desperate need. And Paul knew how overpowering that need could be.

No, logically, the Alien would make

contact with a human Psi-High, sooner or later. It would not be difficult to keep control of such a contact. The Psi-Highs were very few, numbering in the hundreds, scattered in colonies in the larger cities of the North American States. With painstaking care each one was contacted and warned, and those in Security Service were spotted in the most likely places for the contact they were waiting for. The roads were left free, and the airports and spaceports were not checked. An invisible network of human minds lay across the country, delicately tuned, waiting for the spark of contact.

Faircloth was asleep when the call finally came. He rolled groggily out of bed, his heart racing, and groped for the visiphone screen. Ted Marino's face materialized on the silvery curve; a frightened, shaking Marino whose eyes were wide with horror, whose hands jerked nervously as he unsuccessfully tried to control them. His voice was on the thin edge of hysteria. "He hit me, Paul. Just a little while ago."

Paul leaned forward, staring at the pale form in the screen. "Ted, are you hurt?"

"No, no. But oh, god!"

"It couldn't have been just another Psi-High contacting you? It's deadly important, Ted—"

Marino shook his head vehemently. "No, no, no. It *couldn't* have been. I've been in Psi-High contact enough to know what it's like. This was different. It was like he'd lifted off my skull and scooped out my brains."

Faircloth lit a smoke, trembling. "Did you try to fight it?"

The man nodded. "I tried. He was clear in before I knew what had happened, but I tried. I—I think it puzzled him. It didn't do any good at all. He just brushed it aside."

"Ted," said Faircloth. "Now listen. Forget about it. Don't write up a report. Don't even think about it. As far as you're concerned, the job is over. Get dressed, and travel south—down to Florida, Rio, any old place, it doesn't matter where, just go. Use an expense account and have yourself the time of your life."

Marino's eyes opened in amazement. "Are you crazy? I thought this was what—"

"It is. Do what I say and don't worry about it. You're finished on this job. When

you've gotten a good rest come back to the Hoffman Center and take up your training with Dr. Abrams where you left off." Paul flipped the switch and turned back to the room, his heart pounding a staccato cadence in his throat. He grinned triumphantly and began to pack his bag.

The chase was on, but this time, the mouse was chasing the cat.

VI

AS IF a dam had broken, the reports began streaming in. Three more came from Chicago. Then a call came from Cleveland, from a Psi-High technician there who was not remotely connected with the Federal Security Commission. Then from Pittsburgh, then New Philadelphia. Like a fearful, ominous flood the reports of the Alien's contacts swarmed in. And Paul Faircloth and Jean Sanders were ready for them.

Their headquarters was a small suite of rooms in a middle class residential hotel in the heavily populated metropolitan area between Washington and Baltimore. Few of the Federal Security agents, Psi-High or otherwise, knew this. They knew only a visiphone priority code number, and a special word-key for scrambling. This was as Faircloth insisted. Of all the agents posted and assigned, only Paul, Jean, and Roberts knew the true nature of the operation, and each of them worked out their own illogical details without telling the others.

The wisdom of such a procedure was graphically illustrated a dozen times over for the Alien at work was thorough. An operative in Pittsburgh had attempted resistance to the Alien's telepathic overtures, as instructed, and suffered a burst of wrath that had left him blubbering in a corner for three days until a crew from Hoffman Center straightened him out with a week's diet of amphetamine and glucose. More and more, the Alien's puzzlement and frustration and wrath began to seep through, and Paul and Jean watched the reports, and nodded approvingly. Three times, when they were sure that the Alien had left a locality, they ordered cleanup squads to make raids on his former quarters, quizzing the inhabitants and neighbors, asking a mul-

titude of idiotic questions, uncovering a half a dozen descriptions and leads which they assiduously ignored. Then they began stabbing erratically at locations where the Alien had *not* yet been, raids which were carried out with a viciousness and singleness of mind that left the unfortunates who were questioned quaking in their boots. On these raids, even the agents themselves were confused as to their purpose.

And there were other tactics, a myriad of disjointed, unconnected, abortive, harassing procedures, as though the whole search had suddenly fallen into the hands of a madman. A rocketship bound for Venus was delayed four days beyond an opposition, adding a half-million dollars to the cost of fuelling it. A whole series of road blocks were thrown up between New York and New Philadelphia, virtually paralyzing the commercial traffic between the cities for two days. Quite suddenly, the order went out to close down on all passengers in the great St. Louis-New York rolling roads, and Robert Roberts put in a gruelling week soothing the ruffled feelings of the businessmen who had been held up and the companies whose products had spoiled when the swift-moving strips had ground to a halt.

The news that there *was* an Alien from the stars at large, that Federal Security was waging a vast underground battle to capture him, was no longer a deep secret. The tension mounted daily.

And bit by bit, carefully sifted bits of information were dropped into the minds of the Psi-Highs who were still in the Alien's path. Long hours were spent in the headquarters suite planning the pattern to be used. But in the end it was a pattern well chosen and worth the effort because it was soon evident that the Alien was heading for the great metropolitan area which surrounded the nation's capitol.

No attempt was made to contact him. It had been entirely passive. The Alien's overtures had received no response other than futile attempts at shielding; no analyses of his contacts were attempted, and this knowledge was planted so that the Alien was sure to learn it. Warnings of traps were planted in his path, "secret" knowledge of closing dragnets and carefully devised Psi-High

weapons to be used against him; occasionally such warnings were followed by abortive raids, either too early or too late to meet him, lead by psi-negative Security men who had no more idea what they were doing than the man in the moon. But one by one, key facts were planted, pointing always in one direction, aimed at one man, and always the Alien moved toward the city.

PAUL FAIRCLOTH and Jean Sanders seldom left their headquarters. Their job was to keep the pattern moving, and to plan out their individual parts quite separate from each other. It was terrifically wearing. As the tension mounted, both of them grew more haggard. Paul had not found time to shave in a week, and there were dark circles under the girl's eyes. Much of the time she just sat, tense, listening, waiting. Other times she helped him work as he fed data into the teletype and tape readers which had been set up in their quarters. But even amid the tension and exhaustion of the work neither of them could forget the simple, awful fact that Paul Faircloth had been exposed as a Psi-High, and that somehow, they would have to rearrange all that the future had held for them both.

Each morning they spread the reports out on the table before them. "Closer," Paul said one day. "And it's on his own volition. He hasn't been pushed. On the contrary, he's been left quite out in the cold. And he doesn't like it."

The girl nodded and glanced at the papers. "And he's definitely trying to ask questions. Karns' call last night showed that better than any other. And of course Karns didn't know any answers."

Faircloth nodded. "None of them know the answers. That's the beauty of it. Try as he will, he doesn't get anywhere."

"Not yet." The girl rose, walking across the room. "Paul, I'm afraid. We're shooting in the dark. We don't know what we're fighting against."

"Are you sorry you're in on it?"

"Oh, no!" She turned around, her face stricken. "I'd never want you to think that, never." His mind was suddenly filled with shadows, impressions struggling to get through, impressions that would make the

use of words ridiculous. "Oh, Paul, I'm afraid! For you, for both of us. If anything should happen—"

"Nothing's going to happen, darling—"

"But what about *us*? If something goes wrong, Roberts knows about you."

Paul's eyes could not meet hers. "It was bound to be found out sometime. I'd rather Roberts knew than Ben Towne."

The girl's eyes were wide with fright. "But we shouldn't be together! Oh, Paul, how did he find out? Why did anyone have to find out?" And then she was sobbing in his arms, and he held her close, trying to comfort her as her body shook against his chest. "Jeannie," he murmured. "Please, darling, don't—"

"But it's so unfair! Why shouldn't I be allowed to marry you if I want to?"

"You know why, darling! It's the law. We tried to fight it but the people are afraid of us. There's nothing we can do about it. They passed the law, and they think it's right."

"Ben Towne think's it's right!" she burst out scornfully. Her tears were hot on his cheek.

"Towne backed it to the hilt, I know. But people are afraid of a man carrying a single psi-positive gene, like you and me. What would they do if they doubled? How could we tell what our children would be like? Look, darling, think! You're just getting a grip on your faculties now. You're learning how to use your psi-powers, and look what you're doing! You can almost get through to me, and I've had no formal training at all, I've been underground, just training myself as best I could. You're nearly top-grade, Dr. Abrams says you'll have almost complete control in five years, and I could too, with the proper training. What would our children be like with the factor on both sides?"

"Well, what would be wrong with it?"

The girl was fighting back the tears. "Are we such monsters? Have we done things so terrible that we have to be caged like animals and kept under control like criminals?"

Paul shook his head. "People only know what they hear. Ben Towne has been a terrible, vicious enemy, and enough people believe him to give him tremendous power. The people are nervous, and fearful, and

there's nothing we can do about it." He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at her face with it. "We've got a job to do, Jeannie. It might be the most important thing that Psi-Highs have ever tried to do. We can't flop on this job."

"But Towne will just turn it against us—"

"Not if we work it right. And I've got a hunch that we're working it right."

VII

THE visiphone buzzed shrilly that afternoon, and Roberts' worried face appeared in the screen. "Paul," he said sharply. "There are some bad rumors around. I think something's up."

Paul cursed. "What kind of rumors?"

"All kinds," said Roberts sourly. "They're saying the hunt for the Alien is a fraud, that nobody is doing anything at all about it. There were a couple of out-and-out charges that Psi-Highs are teaming up with the Alien to make an attack on the government—"

"My god, can't somebody put the lid on that man?"

"That wasn't Towne's work. It was some other Federal Isolationist Senator on one of the propaganda programs the Normal Supremacy party has on TV. There's talk that the Civil Rights bloc in the Liberal Council is getting ready to switch to the American Council side and force a Presidential election. And that could put Towne in the White House. He's getting ready to move, Paul. We haven't got very long. The word has been sneaking out all over. Towne is behind it, of course, but he's smooth; oh, he's smooth. Congress hasn't been joined into two solid political parties for two hundred years, but they're doing it now, and it'll be a bloody battle. If Towne can get the Civil Rights bloc to switch to his Council he's got the Senate in the palm of his hand."

"Who's the leader of the Civil Rights men?" Faircloth's voice was sharp.

"That's just the thing. It has been Mike Veriday. His brother's a Psi-High. But his stock has taken an awful nosedive since this rumor campaign started. The polls have got him trailing Kingsley from Kentucky by

three per cent, losing ground fast. Now Kingsley, it seems, is in some mean financial trouble that Towne got him into, and Towne is ready to clear him of some nasty charges if he plays along—" He paused for a long moment. "We haven't got much time, Paul."

"Well, I hope we don't need much. But I think you can call in as many of our men as you need to. If things get too hot for you, list Jean and myself as missing, and throw out a dragnet for us. Because I think we'll be very much outside the law in another day or so."

Roberts blinked at him. "Better tell me what you're planning, Paul."

"Don't worry what I'm planning. The less you know about it the better. Just one thing, though. You remember Eagle Rock? The place we built up on Timagami when we were in college? Put three men at a number where I can reach them, and give them the location of Eagle Rock. Then tell them to stand by with a fast jet scooter. Got that? And don't let *this* leak, no matter what happens."

"I wish you'd tell me—"

"We're fighting for our lives, now, Bob. And for every Psi-High in the country. I won't tell you."

Roberts nodded, and doused his cigar. "Eagle Rock," he said. "You can count on it."

Paul flipped the set off and sank back to wait for the Alien to make contact.

HE STRUCK at ten o'clock that evening, with a ferocity beyond their wildest expectations.

They had known that he was near. The reports had come in, and they had plotted and calculated his pathway, and waited. It was only a matter of time, and the carefully planted information built a tangled, devious circle with a single Psi-High individual in the center.

Jean Sanders.

It had to be Jean. Paul hated it. He wished it could be him, that he could somehow protect her, but Jean Sanders was the only possible person to bait the trap. Her psi-powers had been developed carefully and painstakingly for years under the care of Dr. Reuben Abrams and his staff at the

Hoffman Medical Center. A Psi-High individual was helpless to use his powers without training. Just as a child was trained through long, gruelling years to use the mental faculties of thought, and perception, and logic, a psi-positive mind required training to control its powers of perception and physical control, if its powers were ever to be used.

Paul knew that all too well. He had the psi-positive factor, too. He had not realized, in his teens, when he had plagued and baited the two Psi-High boys in his high school class, that there might be a time factor in psi-positive development. Other Psi-Highs showed the signs of abnormal sensory apparatus at the age of one, or three, or seven. The schools caught them, tested them, registered them and sent them out into a life of fear and suspicion and hatred. They were considered freaks, the more dangerous because there was no physical identification that could be used to separate them from ordinary human beings.

And certain men had seen the great power that stood waiting for the man who took advantage of the people's fears. Ambition is blinding; certain men could see the danger to the comfortable, careless wielding of power if Psi-High minds were to work their way into government. But minds, like Paul Faircloth's mind, matured at different ages, and at different times. And some slipped through the barrage of testing, undetected, only to discover later that it was not the backs of the cards they were reading, but the mind of their opponent that held the cards.

The faculty was feeble in people like Paul. He could not read minds. He could not sort and integrate the confused tendrils of conscious and unconscious thought that broke like an endless stream from a human mind; he could not separate the reality of here-and-now thinking from the strands of fantasy, and memory, and supposition, and frustration, and desire, and half-understanding, and confusion that lay beneath the surface of those minds. He could detect falsehood and he could feel suspicion; he could sense love as he had never felt it before, and he could feel himself gripped in the helpless frustration of pity; he could savor excitement with a thousand tingling

nerves, and he could sense the blackest depths of despair, but he could not sort them out to make a coherent picture of the thoughts streaming from a human mind. It took a lifetime of training of a Psi-High mind to do that.

But Jean Sanders could. That was why she was waiting in the room with him when the Alien struck.

She was walking across the room when it happened. She stiffened, screamed, and even Paul's untrained mind caught the impact of the wave of fear and revulsion that swept from her mind. She sank to the floor, and Paul stood by, watching helplessly as she twisted and writhed in the blind agony of the powerful invasion. "Please," she choked, white faced. "Get me a pillow. Then—then listen—"

"Don't fight him," Paul whispered. "Let him in. Let him clear in. And then jump on him for all you're worth. Dig, dig deep—"

Her eyes became huge, like the eyes of an animal, frightened beyond hope, cornered, attacked and helpless to fight back. Her neck strained back, and her teeth clenched. The blood drained from her face as she began moaning. "I can't, Paul—" she cried, "I—I can't get in—"

"You've got to—" Frantically Paul tried to thrust out with his mind, tried to dig through the wall of immense power that was present in the room. The Alien was close, very close, and the presence of his mind was overwhelming. Paul tried to break through, and then suddenly he felt a pang of white heat sear through his brain, driving him back, a sharp, savage stroke that doubled him up, clapping his hands helplessly to his ears as he fell and writhed on the floor in pain. And then suddenly it was gone as swiftly as it had come. He lay panting for a moment. Then he managed to crawl across the room to Jean. He sank his head to her chest, heard the slow pounding of her heart. He shook her, gently; her eyes flickered open, her face filled with horror and loathing. "Oh, Paul, I got—I got so little—"

"What did you get, darling?"

"Nothing. A picture or two, nothing more. Oh, he was so strong, I couldn't make a dent—"

"What pictures?"

She sat up, her breath coming in gasps. "Nothing definite. Ben Towne—yes, there was something about him—just the flash of a mental picture, no rationality connected with it. And some papers, some sort of file—" She clasped her hands to her head. "He—he stripped me clean! I can't—"

"Jeannie! There must have been something else—"

She looked up at him, a strange light in her eyes. "I don't understand it," she whispered. "There was a picture of a farm—yes, a farm, and a dog, and blood on a pair of pants—"

Paul sat back, staring at her stupidly. And then, suddenly, a light flashed on in his mind, a flash so incredible that he hardly dared think of it. In an instant he was on his feet, the blood pounding in his throat. He began throwing clothes into a bag as the girl sat there, watching him dully, in growing alarm. "Stay here," he said. "I'll call you—"

"Paul—where—"

"It's my show, now, darling. Wait, rest, you'll be all right. Rest, and say a prayer or two. Because I've got this Alien nailed for sure this time."

IT WAS incredibly dangerous and utterly necessary. Paul found a visiphone booth in the rear of a station where there were few people, and quickly threw an adapter across the camera, and spun a roll of film in. The film started when the party at the other end flipped on the switch. The conversation was brief. Paul gave the address of a roof-garden apartment in Central Washington, and then disconnected. After removing the film, he reconnected with a number he had given Roberts a few hours before. Ted Marino's face appeared, and Paul heaved a sigh of relief. "How many men do you have, Ted?"

"Two."

"All Psi-High?"

"Certainly."

Paul nodded. "All right, we're beyond the law from now on, Ted. If you or any of the rest want out, take off."

Marino's dark eyes sparkled. "Roberts said this is the kill," he said.

"It's not the kill you think. But it's a

kill, all right. Take the men to this address." He gave the roof-garden number. "Have a jet scooter there, and see that nobody spots it. Use Security insignia. Send out a bleeper if anything goes wrong. I'll be there."

He rang off, and moments later was rising high above the city in his own scooter. In ten minutes he had reached the roof-garden, and settled the little ship down gently on its gyros. He walked inside and sat down in the darkness, and waited.

He heard another jet scooter land. Marino walked in with two other men Paul remembered vaguely. He nodded to them, and they also sat down. Paul fingered the shocker in his pocket, his nerves screaming a thousand warnings in his ears.

The guard robot on the ground floor beeped sharply. Paul reached for the lock-release switch, and heard the elevator start to whine. He unlocked the door and left it ajar, then motioned to one of the men. "Cover the hallway, and back them up when they come. Don't be surprised at who it is."

The man disappeared down the hall. Paul sat quietly, and then heard the elevator open. There were footsteps, and a tapping sound. The footsteps stopped at the door.

"Come on in," he called sharply. "Bob'll be with you in just a minute."

The door swung open and Senatorial Councilman Ben Towne walked into the room, followed by two tight-faced men. One of the men had a hand in his jacket pocket. Towne blinked at Faircloth, and his grin began to fade into alarm. "Who in the hell are you?"

"One of Roberts' men."

"Roberts said you had the Alien," Towne snarled. His green eyes peered around the room.

Marino swung on the man to the right, bringing him down with a blow to the temple. Paul slapped Towne's cane to the floor, and pounced on the other guard like a cat. The Councilman staggered against the door jamb, trying desperately to reach his cane. Moments later the guards were helpless, and Paul and Marino dragged Towne out to the middle of the room. "The files," Paul said sharply. "Where do you keep them?"

Towne's breath came heavily. "You damned snakes can't get away with this—" "The files, Councilman."

His eyes went around the room fearfully. "The boys know where they are," he said finally, his voice so low it was hardly audible.

"Any duplicates?"

"Not of the files you want."

* Paul nodded to the two men. "Take them down and get the files. Then turn the men and files over to Roberts. Tell him to see that the men forget all about this." He turned back to Towne. "You're taking a little ride."

"When this hits the papers it'll be the end of the road for you freaks," Towne snarled. "You can't stop it now—"

"We'll see," said Faircloth. "Now shut up and get moving."

They left the cane in the room. Paul helped Marino load him aboard the jet scooter. "Take him up to Eagle Rock. Keep him there. Dismantle the engine, if you have to, to keep him there. I'll be there in a few hours."

Marino nodded. "Should I report to Roberts?"

"Don't bother. Roberts would have a stroke. I brought Towne over here on a dummy visiphone film of Roberts, which will put him in enough hot water as it is."

"And where are you going?"

"I'm taking a plane west. I've got a visit to make. I've got to see a man about a dog."

VIII

THE farmer blinked across the table at him, red eyed and fearful. "I don't know what you want," he was saying. His voice was high and querulous. "I didn't ask no trouble of the Federal Men. They asked me all them questions, and I told them—"

"That's all right," said Faircloth. "We're just rechecking. You were the first party the Alien contacted as far as we can tell. The ship landed on your property, didn't it?"

The farmer nodded. "Over by the river. Scrub oak and elms standing over there on the bluff. Haven't never cleared it because it'd be too rocky to farm."

"All right, all right," said Faircloth

sharply. "I want you to tell me what happened that night."

The farmer's eyes flitted to Faircloth's face and back down to the table. "I already told you twenty times. Why do you pick on me?" he whined. "I couldn't help it he happened to stop here. Heard him on the porch about ten o'clock at night—I was just gettin' ready for bed. And he said he was travelin' and wanted something to eat. We don't see strangers around here very often, Mister—" he looked up at Faircloth fearfully. "I—I looked at him, and he looked all right to me. My eyes were tired, like I said. I couldn't see him too well, but he came in, and ate, and I offered to bed him for the night. He said no, he had to make on for Des Moines."

Faircloth watched the man's eyes. "Details, Mr. Bettendorf. You've left some out along the line, haven't you? I have a report here that was filed by our field team that talked to you." He pulled out a sheaf of papers in the dim kitchen light. "Says something about your dog barking."

The farmer's face went white. "There anything wrong with that? I reckon the dog did bark. I don't remember."

"And you went to open the door, and the stranger was there, eh?"

The farmer nodded his head eagerly. "I told you everything—"

"And you brought him in and fed him and then sent him on his way?"

"That's right, that's what I done."

"You're a liar," said Faircloth. He eyed the man coldly. "Try the story over again. Once more now."

The farmer jolted to his feet, his eyes feverish. "I done just like I told you. I didn't tell no lie. I heard the dog yelping—"

"And you opened the door and there was a stranger there." Faircloth's voice was sharp. "Then what happened? Step by step. Minute by minute. I mean it, mister, I want the truth."

"I—I looked at him—"

"What light did you have?"

"This here same light. Not very much—"

"And what did he say?"

"He said, 'I'm a traveler and I'd like something to eat.'"

"And what did his voice sound like?"

The farmer faltered. "It was funny—like

gravel in a tin can. A funny kind of voice."

"And where was the dog all this time?"

The farmer blanched, "He—he done stayed outside. He saw it was all right."

"Where's the dog now?"

"I sold him. I mean he ran away. You can't keep a dog forever, Mister."

Faircloth's face was very near the old man's. "The stranger was out on the porch and you talked to him and let him come in. And then what did you do?"

"I—he sat down at the table, I think—I—I—"

"You went over to get some food from the stove, didn't you?"

"Yes, yes, that's right."

"And then you saw blood on his pants, didn't you? And you remembered hearing your dog give a yelp out in the yard, didn't you? The stranger had blood all over his pants and boots, didn't he?"

The farmer's eyes were wide with fear. He was shaking his head helplessly. "No—no—"

"And so you picked up your gun and you shot him, didn't you?"

And then the old man's face was in his hands, bending over the table, crying like a baby—huge, fearful sobs racking his bony shoulders. "He killed my dog," he choked between sobs. "He killed old Brownie, gave him a kick that split his head open. He didn't have to do that to poor old Brownie. I knew he was a bad one when he did that. I shot him. Yes, I did."

THE news broke to the nation that night, and the country went into a panic unequalled since the days of the Great Cold War. Paul Faircloth spent an hour on the visiphone from Des Moines talking to Robert Roberts, going over the whole business from beginning to end. The Security chief chain-smoked three cigars for the first time in his life. Finally Roberts put a line through to the Speaker of the Joint Senatorial Councils. Half an hour later, while Faircloth was making his way by jet back to Washington, Roberts was in top-secret conference with the Senate Council Leaders, and then with the President himself. And then the news broke. It was an official White House News conference, and it had been dismissed barely three minutes when

the radios and TVs were carrying the casts of the announcement.

Faircloth brought his plane down at Eisenhower Field, and saw the crowd swarming across the landing strip before he got to the ground. A dozen flashbulbs popped, and before he could get into the Security limousine waiting for him, he was in the middle of a tight circle of reporters.

"How long has the Alien been at large, Mr. Faircloth?" one of them asked.

"Sorry. The chief will have to answer that."

"Is there any doubt that he's telepathic?"

"No doubt whatsoever. I know that from personal experience. It's the only way he could move freely in the population."

"How was he first detected?"

Paul smiled to himself. "The President gave you that information, didn't he? A Psi-High citizen spotted him in Des Moines. The Psi-Highs have been on his trail ever since."

One of the reporters was tugging at his arm. "There's been a lot of talk about some kind of—well, liaison between the Alien invader and the Psi-Highs in this country."

Paul frowned. "If that were true, would we be working twenty-four hours a day to trap him? Use your head, man. There've been a lot of unfortunate rumors, I'm afraid. But I can speak for the Psi-Highs, and I think Commissioner Roberts will back me up on this—the Alien is menacing our very civilization. He's struck at one of our most beloved public servants in an attempt to undermine the government and prepare our planet for a full scale invasion. There isn't a Psi-High citizen in the country who will rest until the monster is caught, and until Councilman Towne has been returned safely to Washington."

"But what about Towne's anti-Psi legislation? He's always hated Psi-Highs."

"Nonsense. Towne has been a loyal servant of the North American people. He's fought for what he thought was right, and has exposed himself to great dangers and personal vilification to do it. If he hasn't fully understood the Psi-Highs' side of things, that's not a matter for us to be vindictive about." He looked around the circle soberly. "The fact remains that he's in the hands of a dangerous enemy, and it's our

job to save him if it can possibly be done." He nodded, and stepped into the Security limousine. It honked its way through the crowd, and then dipped down into the government tunnel that led to capitol hill and Central Washington.

He picked up a paper inside the car, and peered at it eagerly. The full-color picture of the President's grave face stared out at him in tri-di, and on either side pictures of Roberts and Towne. It was an old picture of Towne, a flattering picture. Paul grinned as he read the story rapidly:

COUNCILMAN TOWNE KIDNAPPED FROM SECRET MEETING

President Reveals Alien Telepath at Large

The President of the North American States revealed tonight in a special press conference that Councilman Benjamin Towne (Federal Isolationist, American Council) was kidnapped from a secret meeting with Federal Security agents last night in what was described as the first step in a plan for large-scale invasion of Earth by an Alien race from another planet. The President reported that one Alien, believed to be fully telepathic, has been at large in the country since his landing near Gutenberg, Iowa, last May 26th.

The Alien's presence was first detected by a loyal Psi-High citizen of Des Moines and was reported immediately to the Federal Security Commission. Robert R. Roberts, Chief of the FSC, has been active in directing a nationwide dragnet to capture the Alien.

Councilman Towne left his home last night at 11:00 P.M. in response to a call ostensibly from Commissioner Roberts. It is believed that the call was forged by the use of a dummy-film, and the Councilman was reported missing when he did not return home. The two attachés who accompanied him apparently have suffered severely from the encounter with the Alien's telepathic powers, and were unable to be questioned at the Hoffman Medical Center this morning.

The President made special note of the excellent and selfless work of certain Psi-High citizens during the past months, in the course of a manhunt that has been shrouded in secrecy. The Alien's telepathic powers invariably overcame the efforts of psi-negative individuals, but through the efforts of the Psi-Highs, Commissioner Roberts has expressed every hope of ending the search within days and securing Councilman Towne's release.

Faircloth flipped the page, glancing at the smaller headlines. An interview with Dr. Abrams reporting the training program for Psi-Highs in progress at the Hoffman Center; a long article, discussing the value of Psi-High powers in combatting a ruthless telepathic alien force; an article by Roberts, very carefully worded, explaining that if one telepathic Alien had come to

Earth, others could be expected. Roberts expressed the opinion that human psi-positives were the nation's strongest safeguard against such an invasion.

Faircloth carefully folded the paper and spoke to the driver of the limousine. The huge car rose at the next tunnel exit, and sped north along the surface, then rose again. Paul waited, impatiently, and then stepped out of the car at the given address. Five minutes later he was holding Jean Sanders in his arms, while Robert Roberts sat chewing a cigar at the far side of the room, looking vastly pleased with himself.

IX

"IT WAS handled beautifully," Faircloth was saying. "The timing was perfect, and there's no question but that it will go across." He looked up at Jean. "You're sure you got everything across to him when he contacted you again?"

She nodded. Her face was still pale. "He turned me inside out. Cleaned out everything I knew. I didn't resist. And then when we'd heard from you he contacted me again, and I knew that we were right. He's been in touch with me ever since. He'll be here soon."

Faircloth nodded to Roberts. "And you've arranged for the raids to start up through New England?"

Roberts nodded. He looked slightly high. "Everything's under control. Marino has a ship ready for takeoff, and we have guns up near Eagle Rock to blast it down. Ain't many people around in northern Ontario. The pictures will be rather bad, probably, but after all—field conditions, you know.

It will certainly look like the same sort of ship that landed out in Iowa, and there won't be enough left when the blasting is over to tell for sure whether the mangled mess that they drag out of it later is man, Alien or oily rags. Those guns do a good job."

Something touched Faircloth's mind, lightly, like a quiet knock. He swung around, his eyes wide. "He's here," he said, and then he saw that Jean already knew. "Tell him to come up."

She nodded, and closed her eyes. Moments later they heard the footsteps on the

stairs, hesitant footsteps. Then the door swung open. They stared at him for a moment, and then both men were wringing the man's hand, offering him a glass, and he sank down on the cot they had prepared for him, exhausted. "You must be dead," Paul said quietly.

"I am, I am," said the man. "Mind if I lie down?"

He was an ordinary looking man. He was slender, about thirty, and very pale. A single-factor Psi-High had no distinguishing physical characteristics; there really was no reason to expect a double-factor psi-positive to look any different. But somehow they had half expected a god-like creature, and he just looked like a frightened young man.

His face was mild and rather sad. But his eyes were clear and sharp, and the mouth was in a grim line, as he sank back on the couch. "I was afraid you'd never spot it," he said. "For a while it looked as though the whole thing would backfire. I mean when Towne was planning the shift in the Council and trying to force an election. I was afraid—and in the midst of that, you started your cat-and-mouse game—"

Faircloth nodded. "We had no choice. We didn't know, and you didn't dare reveal what you were doing at that point."

The man shook his head. "It was better this way, much better. I planned to kill Towne and then let you capture me. Counting on you to work the propaganda right. Then nobody would have known that the Alien was killed before he even got started."

Faircloth smiled. "The computer even listed that as a possibility. Low probability, but that was on the basis of what we knew. We hadn't even considered it—yet every living Psi-High has known for a long time that someday two Psi-Highs would have a child. We could only guess what the child might be like."

The man looked up at them sadly. "The child would be lonely beyond words," he said. "He would be able to hide, yes. He would be able to slow down his psi-powers in order to appear like an ordinary Psi-High. He could never have revealed it. Not even to his closest friends."

"And you knew that the real Alien had been killed?"

"Almost as soon as it happened. He died in agony. He had a powerful mind. He broadcast so wildly that every Psi-High within a hundred miles must have gotten a shower. I was in Des Moines, and got the whole picture clear as a bell. Went down and picked the details out of the farmer's brain. He was too frightened to tell what he had done, and nobody paid too much attention to him anyway." He shifted wearily on the cot. "The Alien must have been working so hard to maintain his disguise that the farmer caught him short. I knew it, and I knew what I had to do. I went ahead and did it."

"Of course Towne will fight," said Roberts later, when the man had drifted off into a deep sleep. "He's clever, and resourceful. When we 'rescue' him from Eagle Rock, he's going to know exactly what has happened."

Jean Sanders laughed happily. "I'd like to see him," she said. "I'd like to see him helpless just once."

Paul grinned. "You will. Things will be too far ahead of him by then. And of course, there will be a physical and mental examination. It will be a pity that the Alien left his mind in such a state of shock and delusion but maybe after a few months of psychiatric treatment we can find out the real reason why he hates Psi-Highs so much. And then, perhaps, we'll have a powerful fighter on our side instead of against us."

He looked around at the others, his face grave. "We can't afford to have the world against us again, not ever. *That* part of the news broadcast was perfectly true. There *was* an Alien. He *was* telepathic. And there will be others coming—maybe in a year, maybe in five, or ten, or a hundred—" He leaned back wearily in the relaxer. "We cashed in on it, this time, but we mustn't forget the parts that are true."

Jean smiled and put her arm around him. "They'll come, sometime—yes. But when they come they'll find the Earth well guarded." Her eyes drifted to the sleeping figure on the cot, and then came back to Paul's and held them. "When they do come, there'll be others—like him—to stop them."

THE VIZIGRAPH

(Continued from page 3)

tion-understanding writers, I believe you might enjoy T. S. Eliot, since you're both asses.

Cordially,

BILL TUNING

COURTOIS CONFESSES

318 E. Commercial St.
Appleton, Wisconsin

Dear Jack,

Some time ago I sent you a letter for which I would like to apologize. It was, I believe, in regard to the Fall issue of PLANET STORIES. I made some remarks in that letter which I had no right to make. I believe I made a comparison between Christians and dogs that was quite unfavorable to the Christians.

I hope that you threw it away when you finished reading it. If you are planning to print it in THE VIZIGRAPH, please don't. If it is too late and the letter is already at the printer's, let this be a public apology.

At the time I wrote that letter I was feeling very bitter for some trivial reason I can't even now remember. While we all have the right to be bitter if we wish to be that foolish, I certainly had no right to vent my spleen all over your new trousers.

How very presumptuous of me to decide I was qualified to judge the faith of millions of people by the way I happened to feel that evening! Nothing could be more immature. While I recognize my own immaturity and am doing my best to supplement the experience that comes only with time by reading and much thought, I occasionally break down and have a tantrum.

This is a rather hard letter for me to write. Looking at one's self without benefit of that mirror in the mind that shows us what we want to see is hard enough when you know you are alone. Admitting one's immaturity to strangers is a far different and less pleasant sensation.

However, the penalty for opening one's big mouth without thinking seems to be six little demons called conscience who keep turning spotlights on you when all you want to do is crawl under a rock.

All right, I apologize for saying what I never believed. I apologize for hurting feelings and bruising intellects. And even as I write this I realize how hypocritical I am. I don't give a damn about anyone. But I do! I care very much for humanity. I never want to do or say anything that will hurt or embarrass anyone. So why do I write such horrid letters?

Jack, why don't you make a rule: no letters permitted from crazy, mixed up kids. It would save a lot of people a lot of misery.

But how are you to know who is mixed up?

It's a problem.

Don't worry about me. I'll outgrow it. I feel better already having written this.

Life is always wonderful, no matter how you look at it. Some times I'm just too damn stubborn to open my eyes.

Sincerely,

JOHN COURTOIS

Ed's Note: Takes more than a small bit of courage to apologize, John, particularly in print. Glad you made it, for your letter does appear in the Winter issue and, of course, stirred up no small storm. I'm sure we all enjoy letters of a controversial nature,

but hardly stingingly vindictive letters. Let the brickbats continue to soar through these columns, but keep our poisonous switchblades securely sheathed.

PLEASED

1725 N. Seminary Ave.
Oakland 21, Calif.

Dear Editor,

The Winter issue of PLANET STORIES was supreme . . . as far as I know, the best.

TELEPORTRESS OF ALPHA C was beyond words, and THE VANISHER too.

Wouldn't THE VANISHER make a swell science-fiction movie; really have the audience gasping when the human form dissolves in the space suit.

The other five star-flung shorts were marvelous, and so was the VIZIGRAPH. PLANET STORIES is my leader of sci-fiction.

Happy blast-offs,

W. C. BRANDT

DEFENSE RESTS

6438 E. 4th Pl.
Tulsa, Oklahoma

Dear Jack,

No one can compare with Leigh Brackett in the space-opera field! There is a sterling example of an unqualified and dogmatic statement which I will not back down an inch on. I will even go as far as to say Brackett compares favorably with Merritt in the creation of vivid mental images and equally vivid emotional feelings. And I will go even further, Brackett is to PLANET STORIES what Campbell is to ASTOUNDING. Brackett is to PLANET what Palmer was to OTHER WORLDS.

My opinion of Brackett may be somewhat prejudiced because the first sf story I read was her STARMEN OF LLYRDIS. The defense for Brackett rests.

Letters:

Link: I do agree with you on the point concerning the circulation of PLANET.

White: I don't feel I have turned on fandom. Right now I'm on the FAPA waiting list and the operating committee for OKLACON 3. But I don't believe it's worth the fuss a lot of people make over it. I am forced to have a certain respect for fans that can put out 40 or 50 page 'zines month after month, but that doesn't mean I have to dote on them or envy them. If a guy wants to do that sort of thing, well good for him. All I'm saying is that I wouldn't like to. All clear?

Wegars: Noted.

Hammon: A very enjoyable letter. And I would like to hear Jim, if I may, say something about Jesus' "love of men" references.

Schenck: A good idea about 2 CS-AB. If that works why not try the same deal for Tops In S-f, only bring it back to pulp format.

Keogin: So you will not tolerate the invasion "of our own virgin field" (whatever that is) by science-fantasy. Just where do you draw the line? Just where does something stop being plausible and start being fantastic. Without the atomic theory the atom bomb would be fantastic.

Stamper: You are not a fan if you do not enjoy fan activities or some part of them. If you do not feel capable of criticizing the stories, and you are probably not, then why do you have words for other letter writers? Indeed why write at all? Why should you lower your lily white person by engaging in written conversation with low-minded people? Just

ignore us, maybe we'll go away. I for one wouldn't feel hurt if you went away.

Deppe: Item 4. Let us clarify our terms. Do you mean PLANET shouldn't publish stories dealing with current religious and political problems? If so, you are right. I doubt if people read PLANET to gather that sort of information. But just what special place do you have in mind for them?

Item 5 and 6, I agree with you 100%.

Dennis: If you want to read stories with ideas why don't you read some of the magazines and books I mentioned in the Fall issue. You don't, or shouldn't, expect to find great ideas in a joke book. Why PLANET?

Fletcher: I am not trying to censor sex. I am only tired of seeing the same damned rehash over and over again.

A good cover by Budrys, the same one who writes, I presume.

VAL WALKER

PAT ME GENTLY

1565 Sacramento St.
San Francisco, Calif.

Dear Jack,

So Courtois is going out in a blaze of glory, eh? Want to bet he won't make it? Nah, not when old typewriteritis has got him in its clutches. I'd hate to see him go myself. I've heard tell that he's one of the select few whose spelling is worser than mine.

Besides the fact, peevish and disagreements notwithstanding, that the boy writes a mean letter. I'd vote him first most any old time. Fact while I'm on the subject, I do this time. 'Course I hardly ever agree with him but then that doesn't deter me any from enjoying his fine free style. I always admire a person who can ramble on and on about any given subject, whether they know beans about it or not. Takes a special kind of talent to be so wittily positive in your ignorance. And then, of course, he's occasionally right.

In my considered opinion, Eberle stinks. I can take the fact that all his figures look like they've been frozen in the same position for several millennia, but when he can't even bother to make the characters look like the individuals represented, I revolt. The story distinctly stated that the Martians were "of a shy, gentle nature, with huge, dark, melting eyes . . ." Now these kids in the picture look about as shy and gentle as an extremely hungry cannibal. And what's with these beady little orbs set about in their gruesome pans? I'll admit that a gentle alien might not exactly look that way according to our preconceived notions of that emotion, but there's just no two ways about it with those eyes. They are definitely not as per specifications.

Why is everyone so kindly volunteering their opinion about whether you should change your format or not? I haven't noticed you asking them for it, or for that matter, doing anything about it.

Only story I really enjoyed in this was THE VANISHER. Oh-ho . . . take it all back, BOTTOM IS UP was the most (to say the least, as the old saying goes). And that Illio-nice, very nice. Emsh gets better all the time. The rest? Oh, well . . .

Oh, goody, Stamper again. Stuffed shirts I've seen before but this gal is the original stuffed skirt. Hiss (pronounced as when villain comes on stage), dear, fans write these letters because it's FUN. Ever heard of that before? And also, incidentally, because they like to see their name in print; just like you do. Of course we can afford to be forgiving and as each person is a product of their environment and

you've had all those "long dull evenings" in the past to warp your outlook, we can overlook it. Me-ow.

So what's wrong with comics, already; Mr. Hodgins? Sounds like Johnny stepped on a corn somewhere. John doesn't like sex? Oh, son you haven't been listening. You should pay more attention to what you read. Besides you stomped smack on one of my corns, to wit, I can think of several comics that I am very fond of. I don't take kindly to a condescending attitude towards them any more than I do with sf.

At last . . . Mr. Johnson you can tell your facts without boring the audience to death. I enjoyed your letter no end, and that from me, who has always been allergic to facts, you may take as one large compliment.

Where's McKinney?

Am ill from the cover.

Trusting you are the same,

PAT SCOTT

NEVER SATISFIED

3971 Boone Park Avenue
Jacksonville, Florida

Dear Sir,

I had just recently returned from a cruise, and while catching up with the latest Science-Fiction, I ran across in the letter column of the summer issue a letter by two readers here in Jacksonville. I never thought there were any fen hereabouts who had enough interest to write in, with the possible exception of service men at the N.A.S.

They must be Neofen though, or they would have realized that after you get into the world of Science-Fiction you become choosy about whether or not a story is good. What I am getting at is their thinking Joe Keogh is a gripe artist. Although I don't agree with all Joe says, I must say he puts forth fairly constructive criticism. True, he never seems satisfied, but if all the readers were satisfied, the quality of the stories and magazine would definitely drop.

Fandom needs readers like these to keep the editors on the ball. I don't mean especially you, Jack, but I think you know what I do mean.

Yours truly,

G. NICHOLAS DE GRUNSWALD

REVELATION!

Lyons Falls, N. Y.

Dear Ed,

I picked up the Fall PS the other day—the first copy in over two years. I was quite surprised at the general high level of quality of the stories. Of course I would have been shocked if I had not found space-opera within . . . but I was totally unprepared to find them, good.

The only item I really disliked was THE TIME-TECHS OF KRA. The story was just plain putrid; not at all what a lead story should be.

Among the shorts, my favorite was Shekley's HEX ON HAX. I've developed a great admiration for said gent in the last few years; he shows every sign of being one of the top finds of the decade. Was also pleased with Otto Binder's bit. His rate of current production appears to be about one-fourth of the level achieved in his more prolific years of a decade and more ago, but the overall quality far outshines anything he did previously.

La Vix sounds the same as it used to . . . a lot of people taking a lot of space to say absolutely nothing. Much of their scribbles, merely mimic

what has been printed in letter columns ever since some high muck-a-muck in the publishing world decided that SEX is no longer a nasty word; now it has merely degenerated into a dull word.

Rather than to give anyone the wrong idea of my virility, let me hasten to add that it is a dull WORD only. The act is to all people as the individual makes it. But it can get pretty boring reading month after month that some dewey-eyed young fan has just passed the age of puberty. So long live SEX . . . but not in the columns of La Viz.

You seem to have found a completely new slate of artists since the last time I was around. Vestal is the only name I recognize, and he by name only.

His style appears to have completely changed, and I, as a minority of one, do not like it.

Glad to see Freas and Eberle present in the ranks. Both are quite capable artists, although it seemed to me that Freas used entirely too much red on the cover.

Adieu,

BOB HOSKINS

AN ARTIST'S WORLD?

629 E. 5th St.
N. Y. 9, N. Y.

Dear Sir,

Just finished reading the Winter issue of PLANET STORIES. I enjoyed the letters. The cover was lousy. A dame with pearly teeth and a brain that's set at ten after seven.

If PLANET STORIES is to survive it'll have to go digest. You can't turn your back on the times. You have to go along with the crowd or get shoved out of the way. The pulps are dead. From monthly to bi-monthly to quarterly. Too many have suspended, too many have been dropped. There's nothing to surmise. You either take the plunge soon or join the dead.

It seems that the same people keep getting letters printed in THE VIZIGRAPH. You should encourage more fans to write in. It gets boring to keep reading the same drivel every issue. Let's have new drivel. So far I've enjoyed all the nonsense, but I'm afraid of getting bored if new blood isn't poured into THE VIZIGRAPH.

Sometimes I wonder if any of the readers read the stories. They call themselves readers, but are they? They seem to enjoy the illos better than the stories, whenever they happen to mention the stories. It's usually Vestal, Finlay, Freas or Eberle. What crazy names! Nobody seems to give a damn for the poor writer who knocks himself out trying to get a workable story out of a sketchy plotgem.

I'll bet your readers think plots come easy to writers. They're dead wrong. They have to sweat for it. And what happens when a story gets printed? Some fan writes in:

"Gee! That illo by Freas for Hogglemeyer's story was really somethin'. What artist! What detail! Freas sure knows his stuff. He should do more covers for you. That boy's sure got it on the ball. I liked the stories. The ones that I read, I read one of them. That short-short by—I forgot his name, but it was okay. The illo for it was damn good. Let's have more by Vestal. He's damn good. He should do more covers for you."

And so on. If the fans had their way you'd have all illos and no text. You could then call the mag PLANET COMICS and never have to worry about going digest.

I started out praising the letters and ended up taking them apart. I do enjoy them. It's just that

I feel the artists get too much credit for doing nothing.

Sincerely,

ARNOLD MARMOR

Ed's Note: Who Finlay?

MISHMASH

550 Congress Street
Troy, New York

Dear Sir,

Just finished reading the Summer issue of PLANET, and while I've been aware of your existence for some time, this has marked my first experience as a PLANET reader. And conversely my maiden attempt to get these tingling, golden phrases reprinted in VIZIGRAPH. First off, and my tarnished plate will bear me out, I am not a consistent letter writer to any magazine. But now I'm onstage for good or evil. Those who do not care for excessive verbiage may duck or walk out. You probably wonder what I'm writing about. Don't worry—something is being written, isn't it?

I've read them all since '29 and hope these remarks will stand for some time (at least until the next quarter moon) as the authoritative raspberry on this subject. Degeneracy has afflicted stf magazines to such a degree lately that one has to be a miraculous mutant—a hybrid somewhere between a Dragnet fan and a graduate engineer—to assimilate, not to mention enjoy, the mountainous and never-ending assembly of mishmash that passes for science-fiction.

One of your letter writers has stated in effect: less straight adventure and more science. In preference to the confused and cabalistic nonsense that some magazines (many magazines) publish I will take the reverse stand: more action and let's leave theorems as such in dusty textbooks. I'm sure that a lot of readers are bored by verbal diagrams that underscore and obliterate story interest.

Some magazines specialize in these types—those responsible seem quadrant-happy—while another editor expresses a confidence that readers find stories of the *very near future* and the technological developments and problems of such eras of vastly greater interest. I say nonsense to this. This type of fiction degenerates merely to semi-Marxian-type piffle. The evils of technocracy can't fit into an entertainment pattern. I'm afraid some of these practitioners, entertaining otherwise, have become pragmatic to the point where dramatic interest has become extinct. Too much leeward—and terms and their convolutions have usurped dramatic license.

Maybe I sound space-warped, but that's it. In preference to tales of the quite-near future I'll take Van Vogt. Now he may be advance-guard, and hard to follow, but his ideas are venturesome—and none of this dry rot socialism. It has been a dopey contention of mine that without melodrama much of science-fiction reads like imitation Henry James. And melodrama comes under various guises, refinements and flavors. Place one of Shakespeare's dramas in a stf setting—it may not become great science-fiction—but still remains better than some.

These remarks might be the caterwaul of a possibly non-scientific mind. I would like to leisurely add that without a logical framework a good story does not stand up so well—it will never be a good story. DAWN OF THE DEMI-GODS, in its more clinical outline, gives this story (as an example) a necessarily authentic air. But theory and evaluation is not overdone. Gallun is content with speculation on functional grounds—recognizing that scien-

tific validity serves only as the backdrop for a speculative adventure. *Sif* of the past was artistically awkward—but almost all writers larded their stories with crumbs of scientific information. It was done on a different scale—with less passionate interest in sociological issues. And that's the trouble—sociology and technocracy have gone on a binge, with little passion.

Getting down to earth, let's look at some of your stories. It is hard sometimes to distinguish between the best and second-best, like in this Summer issue. Okay, I liked this number. Even liked Poul Anderson's tale. This is second time I've read this author; the guy has that important knack of establishing sympathy for the hero—as they say in textbooks: reader identification. His present story was rather pointless, but it was entertaining. After all, there can be no story without story movement.

Technocratic die-hards won't agree maybe. But then they probably never enjoyed *THE PRINCESS AND THE GOBLIN*, either.

Gallun was your lead-off author, and it was high time that somebody recalled the subatomic worlds of *GIRL IN THE GOLDEN ATOM* and *INTO THE GREEN PRISM*. Ray Gallun's adventure surpasses these "classics" on grounds already mentioned above. Bryce Walton's novelette was long-drawn out but treated pretty nicely in theme of long-range sabotage.

Sheckley was the most disappointing—perhaps the first story I've read of his that didn't pass the test. Stearns and McKimney were more original—or at least their stories were first-class entertainment. Not sure if they wrote first-class science-fiction (Stearns particularly)—but their stories didn't bog down.

My last word: stick to the adventure type, and to hell with the purists. And stick to your present large size. Or I'll quit reading your magazine, also.

MICHAEL W. ELM

ELLIE AND THE PRE-PROS

3744 Brooklyn, Apt. 101,
Seattle 5, Washington

Dear Editor,

I have been reading *PLANET* for two whole issues now and I really like it. I think it's a real jolly magazine, and I am particularly taken with *THE VIZIGRAPH*. The letter section in *ASTOUNDING* was never like this!

Fall issue stories:

THE GEISHA MEMORY was a pleasant little story, but badly titled. Why do authors try so hard to get striking titles? *THE GEISHA MEMORY* is a clumsy awkward title, very ill-fitting. *THOSE LOVING HANDS* would have been the obvious title for the story, and it is my belief that the most obvious title is usually the best.

PHONE ME IN CENTRAL PARK was another phony-sounding title but in this case the story was crummy too. Unmitigated doom is in its very nature boring and there have already been too many stories about it. So far as I could tell the only point to this story was that the hero used a naughty word. I'm over twenty-one. Naughty words don't thrill me hardly at all.

HEX ON HAX by Robert Sheckley was like all Sheckley stories: well-written, interesting, and completely unconvincing. I don't really believe that anybody is as stupid as the people in Sheckley stories. Perhaps you'll say I'm just a simple-hearted dreamer?

Two giant-insect stories in one issue are too many, and my husband wants me to ask you whether *THE TIME-TECHS OF KRA* is one that you had

lying around in your desk for fifteen years or so?

I was very much interested in Mrs. Richard Leek's letter because I thought she summed up what most new fans must feel: that almost all science-fiction is wonderful and that the people who complain about it are just neurotically hard to please. Well, Mrs. Leek, here's the way it goes. When you first start reading science-fiction it's wonderful. Some people are immune, but those who aren't find something just subtly lacking in the universe until one day they pick up a science-fiction magazine and read it, and there it is! What they've been needing without even knowing it! The extra flavor, the added savor—I could get pretty sentimental without half trying.

But when you have been reading science-fiction for months and months in large quantities you begin to notice that some stories are quite a bit better than others. Some ideas are trite, some inherently improbable, some inconsistent. You begin to get a little impatient with the crummier stories, especially when you feel that the author could have done a better job if he had worked a little harder, or thought a little more clearly. This doesn't mean that you enjoy science-fiction less. You haven't really reached a point of diminishing returns. Actually you enjoy science-fiction more if possible, because you not only appreciate more fully the good stories, but also, you enjoy not enjoying the bad stories.

Mrs. Leek, practically all the really impassioned fans would like to be professional science-fiction writers, so naturally they analyze the stories they read to the best of their ability. Naturally they write letters to the magazines that might publish them. If they are ever to be writers they certainly must get used to seeing their words in print! These fans have the Pre-Pro Approach. They are not being capriciously carping critics. They are being Pre-Pros. Many of them will actually succeed in becoming Pros one day. Bless the kids! They'll contribute to our favorite literature!

I suppose Norman J. Clarke should be commended for his courage in coming right out in public and saying that he doesn't think very highly of Sex. Nowadays Sex is so generally regarded as such a peculiarly joyous arrangement it takes real guts to say "Phoo" to it. However, "Phoo" to you, Norman J. Clarke. I say hooray for Sex. I got reasons.

1. A sexual relationship is the most intimate possible relationship between two adult humans.

2. If it weren't for Sex, and women having babies, women wouldn't be women, and if women weren't women, what would they be? A fearsome point.

3. At its best, Sex is fun, and a kind of fun conducive to exuberance, expansiveness and tenderness, all very purgative emotions.

Hooray for Sex and Science-Fiction! Hooray for *PLANET* and the Pre-Pro Approach!

Sincerely yours,

ELINOR BUSBY

P.S. Forgot to mention, I thought *DOWN WENT MCGINTY* by Fox B. Holden was quite a good story, and very suitably titled.

Ed's Note: Please Elinor, do not blame Winston Marks (if you must blame anyone) for his story title. The poor fellow is totally innocent since his original title was *THOSE LOVING HANDS*. Mr. Reiss and myself consumed some few hours, not to mention candy and cigarets, before we joyously realized we had hit upon a brilliant title in *THE GEISHA MEMORY*. Ah well, such is the life of an editor.

WHAT PRICE GLORY?

4839 Shelby Ave.
Jacksonville, Fla.

Dear Editor,

This letter is dedicated to the memory of John Courtois.

So you like your name in print, eh, John? Well, PLANET is certainly obliging: twelve, count 'em, times. Not to mention 2 or 3 paragraphs submitted by Richard Hodgens, as well as your own letter, which took up at least a quarter of the page.

It seems to us, and naturally this will merit criticism from various FANS (no fen aloud), that Courtois is not as stupid as his contemporaries may think. With this violent hate-campaign of his, he is rapidly becoming the talk of fandom. What price glory, eh?

Considering your latest attack in the Winter ish, John, especially that piperoo about Christianity, you'll be infamous for many issues to come. We realize this lets us in for it from Courtois as well as the rest of fandom, but we are prepared to repel all attacks (for the sake of pride, of course).

And now to the rest of the mag:

The stories were good, naturally.

The editorial was good, naturally.

The reader's column was good, Double Naturally.

All this praise will help us to get our letter printed, naturally.

But those rupture ads—too much fantasy in them, we say. General Comments:

To Ted White: Heck, Ted, what does it matter what the mag looks like, beauty is only skin deep, or so the saying goes. And the reason for a book not selling can't be just for the way it looks 'cause there are about three detective, western, and love books to every sf mag and most of them aren't printed as good as PLANET.

To John Schenck: (Ho boy, he knows the authors' full names.) According to Don Tuck's Handbook of Science Fiction and Fantasy, John Campbell and Ray Cummings are two different authors.

To John Fletcher: Are you the same John Fletcher who wrote TERROR FROM THE ABYSS; September '52, FANTASTIC ADVENTURES? If so, have you stopped writing? If you haven't stopped writing, who do you write for?

To the Readers of PLANET: Don't mess around with Sam Johnson. No matter what you think, he can quote you twenty different reasons why you are wrong.

A passing thought before we leave, a couple of more letter columns like this and you'll probably double your circulation.

Yours,

JOHN MUSSELLS and RALPH BUTCHER

ISLAM ET AL.

63 Glenridge Ave.
St. Catharines, Ont.

Dear Editor,

Perusing through VIZI and her hallowed enclosure, I see three criticisms of a statement I emoted in PS' Summer number. I must confess they are perfectly justified, and only go to show that great and small and microscopic (the latter referring to the most vociferous of the above) fall alike. Beware, mortals! This is what comes of striving for a somewhat majestic ending. In context, the statement "... as long as man is Christian, he will remain essentially the same; and when he isn't, he will no longer be man," was more or less majestic, I hope, and even justifiable.

But before proceeding, let us examine the criticisms,

their manner, and their merits. Jim Harinon looked at things the most sanely and the least violently. Personally, I admire Jim for one of his statements; while I am still totally unabashed in coming to the fore for Christianity, I think he deserves a fair amount of credit thus affirming his agnosticism. I do not sympathize with the latter system's "belief-in-no-true-belief," for purely human reasons only because it would nauseate me to be in such a world of uncertainty and ignorance re things spiritual as theirs. It is not the main reason, but the most readily asserted.

As to my statement being "carelessly stupid," I would rather prefer just plain "careless." Jean Courtois would rather prefer just plain "stupid" but that's a matter of opinion. Certainly humanity does not have to be Christian to be human. I would say it helps, if only for the main reason that humanity is predominantly social, and Christian philosophy fits into social life in the best possible way, stressing duties instead of rights. Duties come before rights, and it is through the practice of the former that we are entitled to the latter. Man in his relation to other men has an inherent right to life; man in relation to the universe and to God, or at least to God, has no such "right." It is through the Christian tradition of charity (which is just as binding as justice) that a social system has evolved, at times so perfect that man truly would not be man without it.

Looking at my statement in context, we can very flimsily maintain that the preceding paragraphs have all referred to future effects on political Democracy; that Christianity holds within it the spirit of Democracy, but even more, that the majority of governments not now satellites in Europe, and elsewhere in the world, which are at present democracies (with the exception of those, India pre-eminently, which are democracies now through Western Christian influence) are Christian. Thus, talking about the future of Democracy was in a sense talking about the future of Christianity. My fault was in generalizing for the sake of epigrammatical effect, I in no way intended to slight Islam or Confucianism. And especially not Judaism, for which I have, outside of Christianity, the greatest respect.

Jim made one other interesting point in reference to Christianity not remaining the same. For one thing, it is hardly fair criticizing something for its abstract because of its practice. Sin exists in every age, and the "kept woman" of the middle ages is hardly worse than the "divorcee" of the present era. You might gather I am against both; but it seems to me the Jews had a few ideas of their own about adultery, too. Amoralism seems less worse to me than immorality, and anarchy without the marriage bond seems less detestable to me than direct violation of it (legalized or not). I never yet saw where it said that the Supreme Court might rule on the Ten Commandments.

Mrs. Dennis, read above.—As to John Courtois, I had a half-inclination to let him fight it out with Richard Hodgens or Mike May. Courtois sounds like he's about to turn into a latter day Seibel. Boy, you know how that works? The Snarly One sits at his end of the typewriter, disbelieving everybody and their statements including his own, sitting back laughing at the "stupid people" all riled up over the Great Himself when he doesn't mean a word he says, etc. That's what King Arthur hired jesters for.—While the rest (except counter-fanatics) sit back and laugh over him sitting back and laughing over his imagined-public's standing-up and growling. Vicious circle.

Besides, Mr. Courtois, in condemning Christianity after its futile "two thousand years" raises the old Puritanical chestnuts for his "I.e.s." Ergo, Christian-

ity trying desperately to "deny the existence of sex." You neglected the one about chaining the Bibles, or forbidding playing cards and the like. Burt Courtois compares us to the domesticated dog; at least that leaves us no doubts in which category to place him.

Brackett handled her theme quite well. Letters in order of (1) Sam Johnson, (2) Warren Link, (3) Jim Harmon. Nicely going policy, Jack, refusing to infringe upon the sacred domain of VIZI as one of your competitors feels fit. I don't know what is hitting s-f or magazines as a whole lately, but there has definitely been an oversupply of waste paper on the market recently. And no haven is as secure as a well-established, well-weathered, well-traditioned war-horse like PLANET. Keep up the astute selection, formalized policy and editorial glee (on dignified occasions, mind) and my heart will be wi' ye.

JOE KEOGH

ART IN ASHTABULA

1148 West 8th Street
Ashtabula, Ohio

Dear Vizigraph:

I'd like to delve into this matter of art work, but first permit me to make a brief listing on how the yarns in Winter PLANET looked to me:

1. TELEPORTRESS OF ALPHA C
2. THE ULTIMATE EVE
3. THE VANISHER
4. THE GRAVE OF SOLON REGH
5. THE RECLUSE
6. BOTTOM IS UP
7. LIFE OF A SALESMAN

Now that that is out of the way. . . Finlay is the greatest magazine illustrator of all time (in or out of STF). His art pieces are in a class by themselves. His tiny lines and circles show what infinite care go into every illustration. . . and so it makes me sick to find that Freas is hailed as the successor to Finlay.

Which brings me to Freas. . . his stuff belongs in comic mags. No style. No art. Just mass-produced mediocrity. His toneless, amateurish pictures fill up every magazine, and detracts considerably from the value of the magazine. Pity the poor author whose stuff is cursed with a Freas drawing.

Emsh? Now he has it. . . now he doesn't. His tones change. When full of shadows, darn good. When just lines, no thanks.

Illustrations should create an other-world affect. Space men and ray gun do not accomplish this. Regular line sketches leave one right smack on Earth. Finlay's pictures are so distinctly other-worldish that one almost believes a non-Terran rendered them.

PLANET isn't half as bad as I thought it would be. . . but it certainly isn't as good as the inmates of VIZI claim. It is the lowest in quality and quantity, but every field must have its bottom and if the bottom is not too inferior to the remainder, why cry about it? Fen read you. . . what do you care whether it is for laughs or out of pity. VIZI is the one bright spot. The letters (unlike this one) are far more intelligent than those in MADGE, TWS, SS and FSM.

Disrespectfully,

VICTOR PAANANEN

AN OPTI-UP

4105 So. 35th Street,
Omaha, Neb.

Dear Editor:

I've been reading stf for about two years (I stumbled across it accidentally) and have come to think pretty highly of it.

On the whole it is the best type of fiction being published today. Very educational and entertaining, mainly because it deals with all the sciences, philosophy, human reactions, etc., etc. It gives one either an optimistic or a pessimistic view of the future. . . according to your personality. In my case it is optimism. It is a pity so few people read it, but I'm sure it would become more popular if more persons were introduced to it.

While I like stf a lot, I do not like s-fantasy. It is purely escape fiction based on superstitions and the supernatural. Also, most of the stories have a sad ending.

Stf may have its ups and downs, but it is here to stay. As for your mag, it is pretty good. Freas' covers are great (his buxomy dames on covers probably sell the mag) but the Winter cover stank. . . I like to see more than just a face.

Leigh Brackett's TELEPORTRESS OF ALPHA C was the top story, followed by BOTTOM IS UP. Rest of the yarns were mediocre. The VIZIGRAPH reads like a jokebook. . . it is the one feature I keenly enjoy. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,

ANTHONY J. PLETEROSKY

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